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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

CATALYST THEATRE:
IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

BY

PAUL EDWIN JOHNSON

©

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF **MASTER OF ARTS**

DEPARTMENT OF **DRAMA**

EDMONTON, ALBERTA
SPRING, 1990

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ISBN 0-315-60130-2

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Catalyst Theatre: In Theory and Practice**
submitted by **Paul Edwin Johnson**
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of **Master of Arts (Drama)**.

James V. DeFelice
(Supervisor)

Diane E. Bessai

Date: April 17, 1990

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents (Floyd and Genevieve Johnson of Maple Ridge, British Columbia) and to my wife, Cathy, and my son, Kaj. For their ongoing love and support, I am extremely thankful.

ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the theory and practice of Catalyst Theatre, an Edmonton based theatre company formed in 1978. Catalyst's theatre grows directly out of their mandate which is to promote and practice the use of theatre as a catalyst for social action and as an agent of public education. Their theatre is unique in that it almost always evolves out of a specific social issue and a particular and identifiable community.

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The introductory chapter provides a glimpse into the beginnings of the company, identifying the mandate under which Catalyst operates, examining its board structure, along with providing a brief overview into the scope and quality of work Catalyst has done over the course of its history. Most importantly, this chapter highlights and examines the development of the company's evaluation process and shows how it has helped to shape and direct the company as it seeks to interpret and uphold its unique mandate.

Chapters II-IV examine the theory and practice of Catalyst Theatre with specific reference to the development of three distinct forms or classifications of theatre identified and implemented by the company: Theatre "For" (Chapter II), Theatre "With" (Chapter III), and Theatre "By" (Chapter IV). These chapters each briefly survey the

evolution of these forms and highlight at least one significant and representative project for each classification. In examining these forms and the various projects associated with them, certain rehearsal and production techniques developed and incorporated by Catalyst are identified and explained. The final chapter summarizes and makes some projections on the future of the company.

In terms of the theory and practice of Catalyst Theatre, the intention is to identify and examine the development of certain projects and how they fit into the evolution of the three indicated classifications of theatre practised by Catalyst. By looking at their history, documenting selected productions and projects, examining their distinctive rehearsal and production techniques, this thesis is chronicling the workings of a successful theatre company. Both in theory and in practice, Catalyst Theatre stands as a useful and effective model for theatre groups worldwide.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, James DeFelice, for his patience, encouragement and dedication. His commitment to making this thesis become a reality is much appreciated.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the members of my committee, Jan Selman and Diane Bessai, for their helpful advice.

I would like to thank Dr. Chester Olson, Academic Dean of Camrose Lutheran University College, for his encouragement and support.

I would especially like to thank the many individuals associated with Catalyst Theatre, who willingly gave of their time in consenting to be interviewed. Their vivid memories and shared opinions helped to shape this thesis and give it its authenticity.

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CHAPTER I

AN INTRODUCTION

> The degree of integration and involvement in its own community makes Catalyst an important and useful model for popular theatre groups.[1]

The above quotation comes from a review of the fifth Canadian Popular Theatre Alliance festival which was held in Guelph, Ontario, in June of 1989. It is a significant comment in that it acknowledges, historically, Catalyst Theatre's contributions--"especially in the area of linking theatre with community development"[2]--to the advancement and increase of this form of theatre, not only in Canada, but internationally as well. The fact that Catalyst Theatre has been in operation for more than a decade--adapting and growing with each new challenge--bears testimony, not only to the quality of their work, but to the importance and validity of their original mandate, out of which they were established and to which they continue to answer as a theatre company. To look at their history, to document their productions and projects, to examine their distinctive rehearsal and production techniques, is to chronicle the workings of a successful theatre company. Both in theory and in practice, Catalyst Theatre stands as a useful and effective model for theatre groups worldwide.

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[1] Maria DiCenzo, "Bread and Butter: Productive Contradictions," Canadian Theatre Review 61 (Winter 1989) :27.

[2] Ibid.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. This introductory chapter is intended to provide a glimpse into the beginnings of the company, identify the mandate under which Catalyst operates, look at its board structure, and provide a brief overview into the scope and quality of work that Catalyst has done over the course of its history. Most importantly, this chapter will highlight and examine the development of the company's evaluation process and show how it has helped to shape and direct the company as it seeks to interpret and uphold its unique mandate.

Chapters II-IV will constitute the bulk of the thesis. These chapters will examine the theory and practice of Catalyst Theatre with specific reference to the development of the three distinct forms or classifications of theatre identified and implemented by the company: Theatre "For" (Chapter II), Theatre "With" (Chapter III), and Theatre "By" (Chapter IV). These chapters will each briefly survey the evolution of these forms and highlight at least one significant and representative project for each classification. In examining these forms and the various projects associated with them, certain rehearsal and production techniques developed and incorporated by Catalyst will be identified and explained. The final chapter will serve to summarize what has come before and to project some thoughts about the company's future.

This is not a comprehensive study of Catalyst Theatre's complete history. In terms of the overall theory and practice of the company it is certainly not intended to be an exhaustive study. The intention is to identify and examine the development of certain projects and determine how they fit into the evolution of the three indicated classifications of theatre practised by Catalyst.

Anyone who has in any way been involved with Catalyst Theatre is usually quick to point out that Catalyst offers something different than what we have come to expect from the "middle of the road" mainstream theatres in our society. Catalyst's theatre grows directly out of their mandate, which is to promote and practice the use of theatre as a catalyst for social action and as an agent of public education. Their theatre is unique in that it almost always evolves out of a specific social issue and a particular and identifiable community.

> A Catalyst project always involves some kind of in-depth relationship with the audience for which it is created--through research, discussion, direct participation and pre and/or post production activities. Actors have worked in virtually every setting imaginable--on the streets, in group homes, town halls, conference rooms, school gymnasiums, classrooms, hospitals and, occasionally, in a traditional theatre.[3]

As such, one could say that Catalyst is a theatre for special populations, serving an audience that is made up primarily of Albertans, but Albertans who don't tend to be served by other forms of theatre. Jan Selman has further defined this audience as "not only people who are not served by theatre, but people who are not served or are less heard by society."[4]

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[3] Catalyst Courier 1 (December 1981): 1.

Catalyst Theatre's roots can be traced back to the spring of 1977 when a group of drama students at the University of Alberta (under the direction of Professor David Barnet) mounted a collectively created, documentary theatre piece on alcoholism, entitled, Drinks Before Dinner. Although this particular show paved the way for many shows and projects that were to follow--convincing Barnet and others of the very real possibility of forming a viable theatre company--the true origination of the company begins with the process of "experimentation in theatrical form" which indirectly led to the shows and projects like Drinks Before Dinner. It was a process that began as a result of a specific curricular need that had been identified by David Barnet.

The drama program at the University of Alberta has long been known for its successful, and highly competitive, "conservatory" style of professional acting program: the B.F.A. (Acting) Degree Program. Over the past several decades, it has graduated class after class of highly skilled and talented young actors, many of whom have gone on to very successful careers in professional theatre. In fact, its list of graduates reads like a "who's who" of Canadian theatre. However, such an intensive training program necessitates that the size of each year's class be kept small. Therefore, although each year many prospective students audition for the

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[4] Jan Selman, personal interview, 25 November, 1985.

B.F.A. program, relatively few are chosen. This leaves a great number of students who would like to major in drama or take drama courses, but find they must seek an alternative route than that offered by the B.F.A. degree. To accommodate these many students, the department offers a standard B.A. degree in drama, offering courses that can also be taken by "education" students with a drama major.

It was into this drama program (the B.A./B.Ed. stream) that David Barnet came to teach at the University of Alberta. It was clear to him that his students would never be able to compete, in terms of conventional theatre work, with the B.F.A. acting students. The formulation of the idea for a company and the eventual evolution of Catalyst Theatre emerged out of Barnet's quest to find and develop a performance form that would suit these "non-professional" drama students, a form which was not based upon conventional acting technique or the use of script. As Barnet recalls,

> The form of theatre that they were doing--when I came into the program--was process orientated. It was "creative drama" based, with the idea that they could not do impressive formal work. So I set about trying to discover a form of work that they could do that was peculiar to them. I experimented in my first year with "documentary realism": taking an actual image from life and reproducing it. We found that there was a great poetic vision or image in those moments; that these moments had a great meaning. They were taking an image that was absolutely true in its being remembered, and playing it as simply as possible. The technique that was evolved was very important. It's the simple gesture that conveys that which is perceived as true by the person conveying it. It's what we've come to know as "documentary theatre"

technique.[5]

The purpose of all this working and experimenting was to find an acting form where, as Barnet says, "the imagery was different."[6] At this point in time, "social purpose" and all the things that now define Catalyst Theatre, were not a conscious part of the process. "They were part of it incidentally, but it was theatre that we were looking for."[7]

It is significant that the business of doing socially effective drama evolved out of this whole process as much by coincidence as by any sort of design or purpose. While much of Barnet's early class work in "documentary realism" focused inwardly onto the actors' own lives and experiences, it eventually--and somewhat spontaneously--evolved to an outward look at the world from which an "issue" eventually emerged. In their exploration of the "documentary" form, the students who created Drinks Before Dinner focused on ordinary people and sought to represent them as well and as honestly as they could. It represents an approach fundamental to the evolution of Catalyst Theatre and crucial to the effectiveness of the work Catalyst has developed over the years. According to Barnet,

> Catalyst's work comes out of the need to express a voice of people. It's almost as much from a cultural origin as it is a theatrical origin. It is a counter-cultural

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[5] David Barnet, personal interview, 7 August, 1987.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

> theatre. It is a theatre that is against the contemporary culture. But it is not a theatre that comes out of arguments to begin with. It is an argument that comes out of people; rather than people that come out of argument.[8]

Surely it can be contested that Drinks Before Dinner is, in fact, "social" theatre because of its subject matter. It is clearly about problems--about an issue--about people in some kind of crisis. But the topic was not chosen because it was a social issue; rather, the class dealt with it primarily because the people affected by alcoholism were an identifiable group of people. Because Barnet and his students were dealing with how these people functioned in society, the product was naturally social in its orientation.

> We were dealing with how people told us about themselves. And generally when people tell you about themselves, they tell you about themselves in context. "I will tell you about my family, about my child, about my job, about my back; but I will tell you about myself as a social being. I wouldn't necessarily tell you a lot about my psychology. If you want to know about my deepest fears, hopes, loves, whatever, you'd have to guess." Consequently the plays became social--were social--because of the stories being told us....They didn't present political problems, but they did show the structure--the social system--in which these people lived.[9]

Barnet maintains that, in the initial mounting of the show, he and the students were not a socially oriented theatre company. The impetus behind searching for funding to tour the play came from a desire to give the students some much needed performance experience, and not from any notion that the piece might make a radical social statement. It was as much by accident as by design that Randy Ritz (one of the students in the project) approached someone from the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) for a few hundred dollars to tour the show for a week. Following a number of arranged performances--an abbreviated version for AADAC's Executive Committee; a complete show for Regional Directors and senior staff members at Henwood (a treatment facility); and a highly censored rendering to suit the delicate sensibilities of the Commission Board members--AADAC surprised everyone by offering to sponsor a three-month, province-wide tour.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

The show was re-worked and expanded and a professional advertising agency (Baker Lovick Limited) was hired to promote the troupe under the name of "The Intimate Theatre of Alcohol Awareness". AADAC took care of the travel and performance itinerary and conducted a thorough project evaluation both during and immediately following the tour. The tour consisted of fifty-nine performances held in thirty-three Alberta communities. In all, an estimated sixteen hundred people attended the show.

> The length of each visit and the number of performances staged varied from a stop of just a few hours and one performance--to an engagement involving numerous shows presented over successive days. Shows were staged in settings that varied from school and jail gymnasia and church halls to open air locations and conference areas in AADAC and other treatment facilities. Audiences ranged in size from the six people who attended a public performance in Fairview to the 79 persons who assembled to see a similar performance in Lethbridge near the

tour's end.[10]

The evaluation focused on thirty-six selected performances and surveyed a total of eleven hundred and forty-eight audience members. In summary, the survey proved that the show was considered by its audiences not only to be entertaining, but highly educational and of therapeutic value as well. AADAC's published final report on the project states,

> The Intimate Theatre of Alcohol Awareness was novel in its approach to alcohol education and treatment in the province of Alberta. "Drinks Before Dinner", featuring material culled from the life situations of "actual" people and their encounters with alcohol, enjoyed a solid credibility among most of the audiences. The pattern of the audiences' assessment of the performances was consistently strong and positive.[11]

As a result of the positive feedback on this project, AADAC agreed--upon request from Barnet--to fund two other theatrical ventures the following year (1978): a presentational show for senior high schools (What's Up, Chuck?); and a participational theatre project for students in junior high (The Black Creek Project). Catalyst Theatre officially came into existence as a company by virtue of the funding for these two projects. As Barnet recalls,

> The principle behind Catalyst Theatre starting was, I said to myself that as soon as we get two grants simultaneously, we'll start a theatre company.[12]

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[10] Final Report: The Intimate Theatre of Alcohol Awareness "Drinks Before Dinner" Summer 1977, (AADAC [Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission] Publication, 1978).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Barnet, interview, 7 August, 1987.

With these first several projects, AADAC assumed full sponsorship. With each project, a budget was submitted that included all aspects of mounting and touring the production. Having agreed on the budget, AADAC bore the responsibility of meeting all project expenses. It was clear that, as a company, at this point Catalyst could not survive without AADAC's sponsorship. Even after Catalyst was firmly established as a company under the Societies Act of Alberta and had hired full-time Artistic and Administrative Directors (Jan Selman and Denise Roy respectively), it continued to exist and operate as a "funded agency" of AADAC. As Denise Roy recalls,

> What they (AADAC) did, literally, was looked at our total annual budget--Jan's salary and my salary--in terms of all of our overhead costs and then paid us a percentage of all that. I know that they were paying up to three quarters of our total annual budget in the early days. In addition we agreed, of course, to do a certain number of shows or projects on stuff that they were interested in. But it was like a big operating grant.[13]

This relationship with AADAC continued throughout the first two to three years of the company's existence. During this time, however, Catalyst was working to establish themselves as a theatre company independent of any one sponsor; a company that would cease to be identified as simply a funded agency of AADAC.

AADAC's role in the formation and development of Catalyst as a company that "promotes and practices the use of theatre as a catalyst for social action and as an agent of public education" cannot be understated. Even after Catalyst formally ceased to be a "funded agency" of AADAC, their relationship persisted; indeed is ongoing to this day. Operating now as an independent company, however, meant that some major changes had to occur in Catalyst's relationship with AADAC, especially in the area of contracting and money. Catalyst had to build their staff time and overhead costs into every project. AADAC would subsequently agree to pay the company a specified amount of money for each project they contracted.

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[13] Denise Roy, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

With this shift in how the company was administered, Catalyst was free to solicit and initiate their own projects, as well as respond to the numerous requests they were receiving from the community at large. As Denise Roy recalls, there were no shortage of appeals for the company's services;

> We didn't market. We didn't do anything. We just answered the phone. As I look in retrospect, it's astounding to me, and I really think it was a total accident of place and time: the boom being on and all of that. People would phone and say "We're so and so, and we saw the show you did for AADAC" or "We heard you'd done The Black Creek Project, we have ten thousand dollars here, do you think you could do something for us?" I'd be practically screaming with laughter. ...Literally, I think the visibility was such through those first few AADAC projects that people just started to call.[14]

As a young company trying to stay afloat, it is not surprising that Catalyst, in the early years, tended to do any work that paid. They had not yet developed a very sophisticated process for analyzing the community impact of a project or whether or not it actually fit into their mandate as a theatre company. The major determining factor as to whether or not they took on a project seemed to depend upon the sponsor's ability to cover the cost. As a result, they simply could not do some of the most interesting requests. They had no procedure for identifying the project as high priority, nor had they the resources or experience either to find and secure funding for the venture or to shoulder the subsidization of it themselves. As Denise Roy recalls,

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[14] Ibid.

> We used to get shot down all the time with the Arts funding bodies. We had a terrible time with Canada Council and Alberta Culture because we would espouse this great line about Social Action theatre and Theatre for Change and they'd say: "Yes, but you do it only for groups who can pay money. Cash on the line, up front." They were absolutely right. That was a very limiting thing....So we started to become a little more proactive; putting people from various groups together; trying on our own to seek funding for the projects; and to increase operating funds for the company so we were able to have some choices. And we've been in that situation for the last number of years. We have some money and some resources of our own that are not allocated to anything specific; that allow us to continue to exist and, on occasion, to subsidise projects that we really think are important. It allows us sometimes, even, to initiate things in a way we haven't been able to.[15]

Before Catalyst could begin to initiate projects of their own, or even effectively act upon the various requests that they were receiving, they had to look closely at what kind of theatre company they were and more precisely define in which directions they wanted to pursue their mandate. Based on some of their more successful shows, they were building a strong reputation for being very good at doing theatre specifically intended for audiences of children and youth. With participational productions such as The Black Creek Project (first produced in 1978) and Project Immigration (first produced in 1979) they had proved they could design and produce really innovative theatre projects that could be specifically applied to educational settings. As Jan Selman recalls,

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[15] Ibid.

> We could have then spun off and said that we were a children's company that does socially responsible shows, because we were certainly building that reputation. But it's been our history to go all over the place; doing all different sorts of things.[16]

This is evidenced by the quantity and scope of work Catalyst has done over the years. In terms of the company's history, Catalyst mounted approximately sixty-five projects or productions in the first five years of their existence (1978-1982). Roughly twenty-five percent of these events were "participational" in nature (ranging from audience intervention with actors in role, to complete simulations with the audience taking on roles and fully participating in the event); another twenty-five percent followed a "revue" format; a smaller percentage were documentaries or dramas that included music; there were several dramas without music; and a significant number of events that simply included scenes leading into audience discussion. These productions and events took place in a wide variety of performance venues: from fully equipped professional theatre spaces to classrooms and multi-purpose rooms in the basements of church halls. Audiences included students (primary through highschool), general public, community groups, addictions counsellors, social workers, church members, prison inmates, mentally handicapped adults, and numerous delegates at various conferences.

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[16] Selman, interview, November, 1985.

It is clear from this brief and cursory glance at their early history that Catalyst has worked within a wide variety of areas, and has explored and been successful within a broad spectrum of theatrical venues. Still, certain types of projects they had previously undertaken as a theatre company have now either been de-emphasized or completely dropped from the inventory of things on which they feel they should focus. There was a period when Catalyst put a great deal of emphasis on doing projects for certain specialized interest groups, such as shows for professional and semi-professional conferences. Even though this represented an area where costs were certainly being met, Catalyst chose to move away from this type of work. According to Jan Selman,

> ...we felt that the quick half hour to one hour comedic format wasn't necessarily serving our goals. We tended to be more successful the more drunk people were. In looking hard at what our objectives are, these are pretty low priority. We won't tend to do it unless we can interact in the conference in another way, or if the conference is looking at an issue that we're wanting to look at on a number of fronts.[17]

Using this close scrutiny of the company's objectives as a means of ascertaining the appropriateness of individual projects is part of an extensive evaluation procedure that has developed as Catalyst has grown and matured. In fact, Catalyst's growth as a viable and effective theatre company for effecting social education and change is certainly reflected in the evolution of their evaluation process.

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[17] Ibid.

Evaluation is considered to be an important facet in the scope of Catalyst's work; the company has evolved to the point where they have committed themselves to doing at least some form of evaluation on every project. The format of these evaluations can range anywhere from simple discussions amongst the staff, to expensive, professionally done, sophisticated surveys. According to Jan Selman,

> You have to decide with each project what it is you are going to evaluate....We would go into a project defining what it was that we would evaluate, partly based on our objectives. Some agencies that funded us wanted to do an evaluation, and we would cooperate with them in terms of defining what the objectives were as we understood them; defining what we felt the show should be doing. In a few cases we had major evaluations done; which, of course, is very time consuming and costly.[18]

With the early projects and productions such as Drinks Before Dinner, the evaluation was crucial to determining the overall success of a production, and consequently was pivotal in the decision of whether or not it was worthwhile for a sponsoring agency to fund similar projects in the future. The survival of Catalyst Theatre depended on the evaluation process that ultimately determined how successful a particular project had been. In these instances, the evaluations simply tended to gauge the overall effectiveness of theatre as a tool for education.

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[18] Ibid.

As the company grew and solidified, the concern surrounding whether or not theatre was a useful means to effect education and change--either with a particular target group or on a certain issue--was no longer questioned. The problem then became one of setting priorities and determining in what direction the company needed to move. Which populations and issues were appropriate to and fit within the mandate of the company? How could an evaluation process be developed that would not only ensure the company remained true to its mandate, but would adequately assess the ongoing needs of the targeted community and point to appropriate follow-up measures?

Catalyst's Board of Directors was certainly helpful, as the company evolved, in ensuring that a proper evaluation procedure was developed and implemented with each new project. Usually, a small committee of the Board would work with the Artistic Director, together taking on the responsibility of looking at a project and determining its initial objectives; whether or not those objectives changed as the project progressed; and finally, upon completion of the project, ascertaining how successful the project had been in meeting those objectives. But, ultimately, this committee was somewhat limited in how effectively they could evaluate each project. Taking into account that every project that Catalyst does is unique and evolves as much out of the community for whom it is intended as it does from any pre-determined plan or set of objectives, this committee simply could not adequately assess what form and content each project's evaluation should have. As Jan Selman recalls,

> Where we got to in terms of an ideal was an evaluation that came from the creators or the project people. Some projects weren't plays anymore....We wanted an evaluation from the group that was responsible for making the project happen; an evaluation in terms of what we set out to do and in terms of how we thought the process went (how it could be improved) but also in terms of--given we are going to continue this project in some way or continue to address this problem in some way--what we thought we should do. Those were the main questions that we dealt with.[19]

For Catalyst, the evaluation procedure evolved from the obvious appraisal of how effective a particular project had been to the ongoing assessment of where the company next needed to go in this area or with this group. This changed their whole notion of what an evaluation was supposed to accomplish. They no longer found themselves asking: "How did we do?"; but rather: "Where do we go from here?"

> Evaluation...became very important to all of us when we started saying, if we're serious about social action, we need to do more than one project in an area: either with a certain audience or around a topic. If you take underemployed adults, there's a project to do around literacy; there's a project to do around enabling those people to get information; there's a project to do around getting those people to simply feel better about themselves; there's a project dealing with society that asks why we are letting all this human potential go to waste by not providing jobs, education, etc. So evaluation suddenly

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[19] Ibid.

> becomes very important if you see yourself working over a period of years in a certain area.[20]

A unique aspect about Catalyst as it evolved as a theatre company is the involvement of their Board of Directors in the evaluation process, using the process as a springboard into setting objectives and priorities for the type of work that is ultimately done by the company. Most theatre companies go to great lengths to keep their respective Boards uninvolved in the artistic workings of the company. They would argue that things such as the choice of a season of plays should be left to the Artistic Director and is clearly not the business of the Board. Catalyst, on the other hand, actively encourages their Board to take part in defining and narrowing down the major concern areas or issue groups that the company should be involved in. As Denise Roy relates,

> Given that the Board is a microcosm of the community, then its very important for a theatre such as ours--when we say we are working on current social issues--to use the Board to determine which issues are important: the ones that are hot right now. The Board needs to give us some kind of priority and focus to our work.[21]

In the early years, in terms of structure, the Board was made up of the same people who were doing the work (the actors and directors). This presented certain problems in that there were certain necessary Board activities--concerning financial matters and fund-raising, for example--that simply did not interest actors. Consequently, since the early 1980's,

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Roy, interview.

Catalyst has supported and followed a trend towards increasing the number of community members on their Board. Subsequently, their bylaws have been re-written to allow up to twenty-five members. At the same time, Catalyst did not want to lose the valued input of those individuals who were actually out doing the work. They, therefore, devised a formalized mechanism or structure that would ensure that some of these people could still participate at the Board level. The process is described by Denise Roy,

> What we did was we named two positions on the board that are not elected by the membership at large. We call these the "actors' representatives". It's always a tricky thing to administer, but supposedly there is this community of artists and creative people who have done the real work for Catalyst, and when it comes time for re-election they get called to a meeting where they select whoever they want to fill those two positions.[22]

The importance of this representation is further articulated by Ruth Smillie, the current Artistic Director of Catalyst,

> We have an actors' committee as part of our board...to sort of explain the role of the artist in this particular theatre and to be advocates for the actors having a greater part in the process. The actors' committee members interview every single person who was involved in a Catalyst project: finding out how they felt about the process; what improvements they might suggest; how they felt they were treated. But this committee is also included in discussions in terms of project planning. When I prepare a season, I run it through the actors' committee first. Also, they are supposed to be keeping in touch with the acting community and the theatre community as a whole in terms of what kinds of training opportunities they see as being important. It's a way of keeping me in touch with what's happening in the community.[23]

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ruth Smillie, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

The Board, including the actor representatives, take a very active role in defining the areas of concern in which the company should be involved, and in thoroughly evaluating each of the company's projects.

> There is a Program Committee on the Board which is of value to the Artistic Director in terms of approving and working through the choices of which projects and which priorities are going to go into each of those areas. They also, unlike other Boards, are encouraged to come and see shows and to have some input into evaluation. The way that we've found to involve them in the programming area is what is unusual.[24]

With an active and involved Board of Directors and an effective and thorough evaluation procedure, Catalyst has evolved to the point where they are no longer working on a "play to play" or even on a "project to project" basis; rather, as Ruth Smillie maintains, they "work on an issue by issue basis."[25] As a company, Catalyst is committed to "long term" work. Smillie claims that Catalyst's average time-line for developing projects is now approximately two years. That is something that you simply won't find in other theatre companies. Rather than working on a "season by season" plan, Catalyst is often working on a three to five year plan in a particular area. This represents a long-term process that has been carefully thought out.

> It's acknowledged, from the outset, the role of the artist; the role of the community; the process of community development; and the play itself. These are all part of the package, and not isolated pieces that may

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[24] Roy, interview.

[25] Smillie, interview, February, 1988.

> happen at separate times. So the artist isn't just brought in right at the very end, when it is time to rehearse. That person is a researcher and has been part of the collaboration.[26]

It is important to note that Catalyst projects are never developed in isolation. Understanding and addressing a specific audience and their very specific needs is key to education. The artist plays a very important role in that whole process. As was noted in the earlier discussion of Drinks Before Dinner, the effectiveness of the eventual presentation stems directly from the artist's attempts to understand and empathise with the chosen population and consequently to endeavour to represent them as accurately and as honestly as possible.

No one will contest the power of live theatre to engage and move an audience. Through the means of entertainment, theatre can be seen to be an effective way to communicate a message. The theatre Catalyst develops is unique in its direct relevance to a specific audience; to their lives and concerns. As Jan Selman has written in the AADAC publication Theatre for Education and Change,

> Observers recognize the character(s) and their dilemmas and identify with the people portrayed. And because they can watch rather than live the experience, they also objectify the problems and in so doing begin to be able to think about possible solutions....The combining of empathetic involvement with the opportunity to observe, analyze and form opinions regarding the character's actions creates a condition where an audience both wants to think and has the opportunity to problem solve in a safe but vital environment. Their world and their issues

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[26] Ibid.

> have been presented as real and significant....Issues are made relevant and concrete; topics are translated into real life dilemmas which matter.[27]

The truth of this is mirrored in every successful Catalyst project or production. Certainly, over the years, Catalyst has experienced some failures: shows that have not been deemed successful in terms of reaching a particular audience on a specific issue. While the factors determining the relative success and failure of a project are obviously many and varied, it can be argued that whenever the company lost sight of the methodology by which they had established and maintained their mandate--whenever the company lessened or underestimated the importance of their involvement with the community whose needs they were seeking to articulate--they decreased their chances for success.

In the early years, the successful Catalyst projects always tended to include the actor as a true collaborator, involved in all facets of a project: from researching a specific population and/or issue, to actively participating in the project's ongoing evaluation. Because of their extensive involvement, the acting company would inevitably develop a strong commitment to each and every project. As the company grew and evolved, the continuation of this degree of actor involvement in the many and various Catalyst projects--both financially and in terms of time--was not always economically feasible. In these cases, while the actor's involvement may have been abbreviated, the company had to ensure the preservation of the process of establishing and maintaining, with each project, a strong relationship with the community.

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[27] Jan Selman, Theatre for Education and Change, (AADAC publication), p. 10.

Key to this process is understanding the many and varied ways theatre can be used as a tool for education and change. As much as the issues and concerns that are being raised in a production must, by necessity, emerge from the targeted community, so too, out of the research into that population must evolve the appropriate theatrical form for each particular project.

Over the years, Catalyst Theatre has experimented with a number of theatrical forms and classifications. It can be argued that none of these forms are unique to or have originated with Catalyst--in fact, the theatre of Catalyst can be viewed as an eclectic borrowing of techniques and methods from around the world--but the company has, in theory and in practice, further developed and articulated each of them to a distinctive level commensurate with the type of work Catalyst does.

Catalyst categorizes the types of theatre that they do into three main classifications: theatre "for"; theatre "with"; and theatre "by". Theatre "for" is "presentational theatre": theatre performed by an outside group of actors for a specified audience. Theatre "with" is "participational theatre": actors performing a play that directly involves the audience; the involvement can range from audience discussion on the play's events and issues, to role playing within the context of a theatrical simulation.

> "Theatre with" includes the audience as an expert. Wherever the group who it's for is included as the expert, that's "theatre with". It doesn't matter whether that's in direct participation or in the creation of the play.[28]

Theatre "by" can encompass either of the previous two categories but is unique in that it is theatre performed by the targeted community itself, rather than by an outside group of actors.

> The distinction between "theatre with" and "theatre by" is that "theatre with" uses professional actors to actually do the material. "Theatre by" uses the people directly affected by the issue as the storytellers. They are actually performing their own story.[29]

The following three chapters will be used to identify and explore the unique ways in which Catalyst has incorporated and developed these three categories of theatre. Each chapter will highlight one particular production or project that, in addition to being significant to that category, is principal in the overall development of Catalyst Theatre and to the evolution of certain distinctive rehearsal and production techniques.

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[28] Smillie, interview.

[29] Ibid.

CHAPTER II

THEATRE "FOR"

Theatre "For" is in fact a blanket term meant to encompass all forms of "presentational" theatre; theatre where actors perform a play "for" an audience. In this type of theatre, there is usually a very clear distinction, both physically and aesthetically, between the audience (the viewers) and the actors (the performers). The objective of this type of theatre is to engage the audience in the action and the message of what is being presented on the stage, to entertain as well as to educate.

Traditionally, much of what Catalyst would term "presentational" theatre has come to mean the representational enactment of a scripted play. In this sense, the script (or blueprint) for the production--the dialogue, the characters and setting, along with the overall storyline--has been prepared in advance by a playwright who may or may not be present and involved in the physical mounting of the play. Historically, there are also many examples of presentational theatre events where there is no script; or if there is, it exists in the form of a rough outline or scenario from which the actors are expected to improvise their dialogue and their lines of business.

"Documentary Theatre" is a term used to describe a distinct and significant presentational theatre form that has existed in Canada for the last several decades. The many and varied productions falling under this heading are usually "collectively" created by a group of actor/writers who involve themselves in researching a particular subject area, historical event, or distinct population (interest group) and then create a play which dramatizes that which they have been researching. The finished product is typically a collage of scenes, stories and songs which may or may not have been written down prior to the rehearsal and performance stages. The emergence of Documentary Theatre in this country has been described by Alan Filewod as "one of the most important developments of modern English Canadian theatre."[1]

Much of Catalyst Theatre's "presentational" work has been created collectively by various groups of actors and writers and could be categorized loosely under the heading of Documentary Theatre. As mentioned in the introduction, the original 1977 production of Drinks Before Dinner was a Documentary Theatre piece presented in a basic "representational" manner in which the actors create a specific performance area separate and distinct from the audience area. The show was collectively created from research in a specified subject area. Under the broad heading of "alcoholism"--and in typical Documentary Theatre style--the actors created their characters, compiled the stories, and constructed the scenes based on the people they had met and talked to during the research period.

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[1] Alan Filewod, Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. vii.

This production is important in Catalyst Theatre history for a number of reasons. Not only is it acknowledged as paving the way for the inception of Catalyst Theatre as a viable company, but it stands as a precursor to many of the Catalyst shows that were to follow. It merits further discussion and closer inspection because the rehearsal and production techniques employed in the project can be seen as a type of "litmus test" to measure and assess future Catalyst methods. Specifically, the process by which this show was developed made apparent the importance of direct and ongoing research with the community for whom any Catalyst project is intended. In the company's history, the resulting show's authenticity and effectiveness is habitually more dependant on the researcher/creator's ability to "get the right stories", than on any specialized training, experience or skill on the part of its actors.

Significant to this production is the fact that none of the actors involved had any professional acting experience. Collectively, as students, they were not only very inexperienced, but relatively untrained as well. As members of a senior improvisation class, they all had at least one other class in the improvisatory style of acting, but were basically lacking in any disciplined formal acting training.

The course was intended to give the students practical experience in improvisational production. The mandate was to produce, over two consecutive semesters, four distinct and separate productions, each developing out of improvisational techniques. David Barnet, in his quest to find a dramatic form to suit his students was much influenced by The Farm Show, a documentary show collectively created by Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille. The production, which had a national tour in the mid 1970's, was directly based on the people and events of a farming community near Clinton, Ontario. It represents an important link in the evolution of the collective technique at the University of Alberta.

> We were looking for this technique: the technique of creating theatre based upon very strong images or from real life. We started off in the real lives of the actors. And then came The Farm Show, which clearly showed for me that this form of theatre--where the actor, in a way, was the vehicle or conduit to connect us to the real world--could work. Here was a play where continuous story, scene structure, continuous character development were all unimportant. But the episodic form of theatre would work.[2]

Wanting to experiment in this form of theatre, Barnet introduced the basic ideas and techniques of Documentary Theatre into this "Improvisational Production" course (Drama 452). The course was as new and experimental as the form itself, and the potential for discovery was matched only by the distinct possibility that the course could be a dismal failure.

With this particular offering of the course--and because Barnet had been ill much of the year--the class had struggled to mount three productions, each of which met with little success. These shows had evolved primarily out of the company's own experiences, and--now late into the second term--Barnet felt that the class needed to research and explore a specific population or topic foreign to their own life experiences--that the class needed to do something in the "Documentary" style. In Barnet's words,

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[2] David Barnet, personal interview, 7 August, 1987.

> The reason that we did Drinks Before Dinner is that I, as a teacher, knew that we had to do something which was based on and related to specific, actual human beings. ...The need was to do something that was actually based on field research with people who could then influence what we were doing and who could keep us honest....I felt that the class would have been a waste of time if we hadn't done that.[3]

The class deliberated on the subject area of the research and, subsequently, of the production itself. It came down to a decision on one of two topics: homosexuality or alcoholism. In the case of the former, Barnet realized the group really didn't have a vested interest in the topic--since none in the group were homosexual--and consequently would not do an effective job at representing this population adequately. With the other topic, many in the group had close relatives who were alcoholics; plus, it was felt that this was a marginalized group of people without a voice--a population who might well profit from these efforts.

Thus, this group of relatively untrained actors ventured out into the research field: studying books, articles and documents on the subject; interviewing professionals who worked in the area; and finally meeting and talking with alcoholics themselves. This last aspect of the research was difficult, primarily because of the social stigma attached to alcoholism. Likewise, many of the organizations founded to aid alcoholics in overcoming the disease, are based on a fundamental premise of anonymity. As a result, the company put together a preliminary presentation--based as much on conjecture as on actual research--and presented it at an open "Alcoholics Anonymous" meeting in a downtown Edmonton treatment centre. Although the show was extremely amateur, both in its structure and in its presentation, the response from the audience was overwhelming. The alcoholics in the audience were exceedingly willing, upon seeing the show, to open up to the actors and share their own life stories.

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[3] Ibid.

The material the actors brought into subsequent rehearsals not only had tremendous dramatic possibilities, but was firmly tied into real human beings whom the actors greatly respected. There was now an honesty to the material that had not been there before. The entire preliminary draft of the show was scrapped in favour of a format which would better encompass the characters, the stories, and scenes coming out of this more immediate form of research. What is significant about this production, and has remained true of much of the work that Catalyst creates, is that the research determines, finally, how the scenes are constructed and how the play is assembled. According to Barnet,

> ...In Drinks Before Dinner it was quite clear what we had to do and that was to portray the people we had met with as much celebration and respect as we possibly could.[4]

The real strength of Documentary Theatre issues from the close connections the actors (as creators and performers) develop and maintain with the population and subject matter of their project. This close connection keeps the actors honest in their character portrayals and gives the show its special credibility. In AADAC's published report on the project, Barnet writes,

> All this became particularly clear during the work process of Drinks Before Dinner when the original subject for the stage character "Marilyn", a lady whom the actors had met at an A.A. meeting, watched a rehearsal and gave careful notes on how a scene depicting her attempted suicide could be more accurate. At the same time she told the actors that she was pregnant but would not marry the child's father because he was a drinker. Three months later she returned with her baby to see the last performance of the play--and watched a scene where her stage version, "Marilyn", decides not to tell her boyfriend about her pregnancy. The actress was on the stage; the lady she had met in A.A.--whom she liked and admired a great deal and whom she was playing at the moment--was in the audience; and the baby was crying softly. Nobody else knew this was happening, but the actress had to be as honest and as clear and as good as she could possibly be.[5]

This close connection with the characters and the material presented problems, however, in terms of the overall structure of the piece. Each actor, in an attempt to remain honest to the persons who had voluntarily shared their life stories, wanted to retell those stories or enact those scenes in exactly the same way he or she had heard them. As a result, scenes and monologues tended to drag on and become boring. As Barnet recalls,

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[4] Ibid.

[5] David Barnet, Final Report: The Intimate Theatre of Alcohol Awareness "Drinks Before Dinner" Summer 1977, (AADAC Publication, 1978).

> I think that dramaturgically we were very, very weak; although I think we made some real movements forward. I remember when we did the show out at one of the schools--the first or second time that we had done it--and the teacher came up to me about half way through it and said: "You know, this is getting boring." And he was right. Basically there was no structure. And boredom or interest primarily comes from character development and structure and rhythm and so forth--all of which we were terribly green about--because we were just doing scene after scene after scene after scene and there was no rhythmic build; no development. But we were on the beginning of something.[6]

That beginning, as has been documented in the introduction, included a three-month tour of Alberta in which the show was allowed to develop and grow. The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission put up the money, and Sandra Balcovske was brought in to direct the show as it toured. As a result, the show was being constantly changed and upgraded through a series of major and minor editorial modifications. This is acknowledged in a published summary of comments and suggestions from the members of the cast:

> Thanks to the flexible format, the show was able to change continually throughout the summer in response to audience reaction and suggestions. Scenes were added, moved around and reworked and characterizations sharpened as we learned more about the play's subject matter and acquired a growing sense of responsibility toward our public and to making our portrayals as perceptive and

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[6] Barnet, interview, August, 1987.

honest as possible.[7]

Early on, the show resembled a dramatic representation of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with character after character getting up, introducing himself or herself, and proceeding to tell an intimate story from his or her own life. Gradually, where appropriate, these individual monologues were transformed into dramatic scenes. Initially, each actor played at least one major character that had evolved from their research. In order to facilitate the transposing of monologues into scenic form, characters had to be added to fill out the roles required. In one case, two of the initial characters--Janet, the wife of an alcoholic, and Matt, an alcoholic trying to hold on to his job and family--were arbitrarily joined together as husband and wife, even though, in real life, they probably didn't even know each other.

Structurally, the show evolved into a collage of scenes and monologues held together by various songs and simple dance numbers. Some of the musical numbers were written specifically for this show by certain cast members; two of the songs, including the title song "Drinks Before Dinner", were penned by Lowden Wainwright III.

The physical set consisted of a table, some chairs, benches, and a folding screen for a backdrop. Everything was easily transported in the back of a van.

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[7] Final Report: Intimate Theatre, (AADAC Publication, 1978).

By the end of the tour, the structure had become quite cohesive, and the show was relatively entertaining as well as educational and informative. It also received some excellent reviews in a number of newspapers and publications. Many critics especially praised the production for avoiding a didactic and moralistic approach. In a review from the Saint John's Edmonton Report, Barry Harris writes,

> The message hits home, to be sure--but without preaching and polemics; bathos and bromides. The company of seven young performers makes its points about the very real problems of alcohol addiction without delivering a lecture, but rather by presenting a quite acceptable piece of improvisatory theatre.[8]

Concentrating on presenting good theatre and remaining honest to the population whose problems they are articulating, is something that has characterized Catalyst Theatre from the outset. The significance of this is noted by Jan Selman,

> The important thing about Catalyst and the people who have worked with Catalyst is that we tended not to be doctrinaire about our politics or objectives. On the whole we've avoided the battering ram message show; the hard-line political tract kind of piece that I don't think changes anybody. We've tended to avoid that type of thing and we've been criticised very strongly for not taking a hard enough stand.[9]

Adverse criticism did not weigh heavily on the company's initiatory production, Drinks Before Dinner. In fact, in terms of the sponsor's expectations and the response of the population for whom the show was intended (and for whom the show mostly played), the production was an overwhelming success. In AADAC's published summary of the production is recorded the following observation:

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[8] Saint John's Edmonton Report, 22 August, 1977, p. 34.

[9] Jan Selman, personal interview, 25 November, 1985.

> One of the most positive aspects of the show--which, to our knowledge, is the first project of its kind ever attempted in Canada--is that it reached people from all walks of life, from practising alcoholics to young children. When audiences were defined as resource people, groups typically included social workers, nurses, local police, RCMP, some teachers, probation officers, and people involved in alcohol programs.[10]

As Catalyst Theatre was established and grew as a company, Drinks Before Dinner was followed by other shows done in the "presentational theatre" form. Many of these were intended for a very specific audience and in their creation emulated this same "documentary" style of presentation. Some shows, however, attempted to move away from the strict factual veracity of this type of theatre as the company began to realize the limitations of the documentary form. As Alan Filewod writes,

> Documentary theatre tends to put the process by which it is created into the fore by including references to that process within the performance itself. In this way it breaks down the normal expectation of fiction on stage. At the same time it tends to include references and techniques which authenticate the play's claim to factual veracity....Ultimately, these plays are atextual; they repudiate the idea of a fixed, unchanging text which exists as a blueprint, as it were, for a performed interpretation.[11]

While holding to the belief that the ultimate message of a show must be authenticated through the research phase, Catalyst tried to introduce an element of fiction back into the characters and scenarios of the plays they were creating. Many of these shows were still being created collectively but the company was given more freedom in the interpretation and processing of information gained from research, which ultimately allowed for more freedom and experimentation in the overall structure of the play.

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[10] Final Report: Intimate Theatre, (AADAC Publication, 1978).

[11] Alan Filewod, Collective Encounters, p. ix-x.

The 1979 production of On And Off The Street combined fictional characters and scenario with the actuality of teenage drug trafficking. The storyline was pure fiction, and although it was punctuated by a rock and roll musical score, it centred around a select character and was structured to have a strong beginning, middle, and end. The characters, although based on people whom the actors had met in their research, had been fleshed out and universalized to better suit the structure of the story and the aims of the project. Unlike Drinks Before Dinner, this show had a fully designed set and toured with full lighting and sound capabilities. Instead of carrying everything in the back of a van, the company now had to load and unload a three-ton truck with each presentation of the show.

The 1980 production of City Slickers was again collectively created and included a large amount of fiction in its writing. While, structurally, it resembled the earlier collectives--a collage of scenes and monologues and musical numbers--it did exhibit some form of character development through a progression of scenes. It was categorized as a revue because there were a number of characters whose stories were being developed, to a large extent, independent of each other. Dramaturgically, there was an attempt to connect the various structural threads, as two characters were married to each other, and several were connected through their jobs or social lives. This show, too, toured with a large set with full production values but only played in fully equipped theatres within the major centres of Alberta.

City Slickers is significant in that, even though it was commissioned and co-sponsored by AADAC and the Canadian Mental Health Association, it was intended solely for a general public audience. It opened in Edmonton with a two-week run, and played multiple performances in each chosen centre on the tour. It received strong reviews in major newspapers and periodicals throughout the province. Keith Ashwell of the Edmonton Journal called it "a damned good revue".[12] Stephen Weatherbe, calling the show "A hilarious revue about urban nihilism",[13] goes on, in his critique, to present some of his (and, quite likely, the general public's) previous perceptions of Catalyst Theatre, and how this show can be seen as an attempt to break new ground and establish a wider audience.

> As good as it is at collective creation, Catalyst Theatre has, until now, never really escaped the limitations of the technique. The cast chooses or is assigned a topic,

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[12] Edmonton Journal, 17 May, 1980, p. B15.

[13] Alberta Report, 30 May, 1980, p. 39-40.

> and sets out to docu-dramatize it, each actor researching his own subtopic, and contributing his own insights, situations, even characters. The results usually are topical, naturalistic in style, and seldom profound, and have a certain expedient air. But this time, Catalyst has really excelled. This particular assemblage of "collective creators" has produced a racy, often hilarious revue on, of all things, the stress of life in the big city.[14]

With the success of City Slickers, Catalyst proved to themselves that they could mount shows and compete within the public realm of theatre. Over the next couple of years, they again ventured into the general public realm with shows such as Catch '75 (a revue created to honour Alberta's 75'th anniversary as a province), and a drama entitled Play For Keeps.

With the 1982 production, Family Portrait, Catalyst tried again to create a collectively written, presentational, full length play for a general public audience. Unlike City Slickers, this production represents a conscious choice to move away from the "revue" format that was so typical of their previous "collectives". Experimenting with the structure became a major focal point, as the company faced the dilemma of how to collectively create a cohesive story rather than a collage. As Jan Selman recalls,

> "Story" matters in our work, and we're not doing a very good job with "story" yet. The best we do is collages where we, every once in while come back to the same story to hear what happens next. We hadn't made it work for us, the way it could.[15]

It inevitably happens in the collective process that the creators (actors) not only withdraw to conduct their research, but they also separate for a good portion of time and do their writing, individually or in smaller groups. They write for themselves (the characters that they've created), often with little consideration as to what the other actor/writers might be creating. Thus, when all of the ideas are compiled there will always be a number of disparate threads or stories that the director must try to weave together in some sort of cohesive form. As a result, individual characters and stories are often held tenuously together by some overall theme or topic.

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Jan Selman, personal interview, 7 August, 1987.

In many Catalyst shows, music and songs have been used to bridge the many diverse elements within the show's overall structure. In fact, music has been effectively utilized as an important and necessary segue between the scenes or monologues of most collective shows. To use the analogy of a patchwork quilt, if the stories and scenes can be seen as the various pieces of cloth in the quilt, then music is the stitching that holds them all together. This distinctive style which features a collage of scenes and stories bridged together by songs and music is very much a part of the Catalyst tradition.

Family Portrait was a show, as Jan Selman says, that "grew out of the past, and led to the future."[16] Having carefully evaluated past shows and considered their limitations, the company wanted to try and approach this project somewhat differently. They knew that they needed to provide a strong cohesive structure in which the actor/creators could channel their contributions. As Tony Hall remembers,

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[16] Jan Selman, panel discussion with Jane Heather & Tony Hall, 3 August, 1988.

> ...there was a feeling that we had learned something from past shows and we knew that we had to come in with a structure before rehearsal because we felt we needed a stronger directorial hand from the beginning.[17]

As a result, Hall himself was consequently commissioned not only to give the play a cohesive structure but, likewise, to provide a strong directorial hand during the workshop and rehearsal phases.

Prior to Hall being brought in to work on the scenario, Jan Selman (as Artistic Director of the company) had a number of meetings and deliberations with the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) regarding the form and content of the show. AADAC had put up the initial funding for the show and had commissioned it with the intention that it would address the subject area of "lifestyle": looking at a person's way of life as a major contributing factor to their alcohol and drug abuse problems. AADAC had only just begun to focus their energies in the area of "prevention". They were moving toward trying to solve tomorrow's problems today; or rather, trying to avoid future problems by educating the young people of today.

Based on their evaluations of some previous Catalyst shows, AADAC was convinced live theatre could play an important role in educating audiences about the importance of making good "lifestyle" choices. The first round of "prevention" shows that Catalyst produced for AADAC, while quite successful in their own right, represented a general uncertainty regarding the meaning and method of approaching the whole "prevention" concept.

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[17] Tony Hall, panel discussion with Selman and Jane Heather, 3 August, 1988.

AADAC entered into the discussions on Family Portrait with a somewhat clearer understanding of what they wanted the show to accomplish. They recognized that, in terms of their overall program of prevention, they needed to work with a primary audience of teens and a secondary audience of the adults who affect teens and who play a major role in teen development. They wanted this show to say things to the adults about the role they play in encouraging their teens in making positive lifestyle choices. They also wanted the show to help the adults with the whole process of letting go, of understanding the increasing responsibility that teenagers want and deserve.

Catalyst was able to sell AADAC on the idea of looking at the Alberta family from the perspective of how you make change, and how you communicate. At this point, Catalyst had already done a show at a Family and Community Support Services (FCSS) sponsored event in Fort McMurray, dealing with this whole area of family problems. Interestingly enough, this show was also called Family Portrait and may have had a significant effect on Catalyst's discussions with AADAC regarding this new "prevention" project, discussions which subsequently convinced AADAC on the idea of using this play to explore the traditional family structure. Thematically, the two ideas came together rather gratuitously for Catalyst. However, as Jan Selman points out,

> ...you work in a subject area and you become known in that area, for one thing; plus you know more in that area and you have certain ideas about what you want to do with it. So it's in your own interests to try and pursue something rather than hop from issue to issue. So we have a number of shows that were part of a wave of interest. I think there were other "family-related" shows in and around that time.[18]

Catalyst was, in fact, involved in other "family-related" shows in and around the time they were in consultation with AADAC. The FCSS sponsored show occurred in October of 1981. In May of 1982, Catalyst did a show for the Alberta Council for the Family, entitled: Family Scene. In an ongoing effort to build on what they had already done and to provide some continuity, it was deemed to be in Catalyst's own best interests to pursue this overall theme of the Alberta family.

Catalyst had originally gone to AADAC and agreed that the show would be aimed at a general public. That fact alone informed the content of the show a great deal as Catalyst examined the question of who it is that goes to the theatre, and how they could best tailor a show to suit the needs of this audience. According to Jan Selman,

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[18] Selman, panel discussion, August, 1988.

> With general public shows you know that you hit a middle class audience who generally come because it's a play; not because it's about a certain issue. So you have to say: "Why do I want these people to think about this issue, and in what way can we make any difference?" They can make some difference: they can donate some money; they can volunteer their time; they can write to their politician; they can simply change their own personal attitude which over time influences the world.[19]

For its part, AADAC felt the show had to give a positive message, but apart from that, the parameters were left pretty much undefined.

Artistically, this openness regarding theme and content gave Catalyst a great deal of freedom to experiment with form and structure. This, along with the kind of funding AADAC was providing, allowed for Catalyst to implement a phased writing and development process, something they had started to develop in a number of previous projects.

In terms of the script's development, there was some initial research done by the director, Tony Hall. During this phase, Hall developed some preliminary rough ideas regarding the form and content of the show. This was followed by a workshop where those ideas were improvised. Hall maintains that, even at this point in its evolution, the show had a very strong director's vision; there was a definite structure provided in which the people were asked to improvise and to write.

In an attempt to put the material that was being developed by the workshop cast into a certain overall structure, Hall would offer up cryptic statements like: "There has been a death!" Everyone would then be required to focus and frame their improvising around that concept. Also, Hall introduced strong visual images around which the cast was asked to create. For instance, the whole image of a dinner table and things happening around that table--ultimately comprising a major portion of the play's eventual overall structure--was simply dropped on everybody. There was a concerted effort to create as good a play as could be made, using the process of putting the research material into the context of strong visual images and enigmatic concepts.

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[19] Selman, interview, November, 1985.

There were times, however, within that first workshop phase when the cast was totally unclear about where the thing was going. Nevertheless, it was always assumed by everyone that the director knew. Hall recalls a day during this phase, where he was supposed to meet with Selman to explain how the thing was going to work.

> I remember that meeting because, up until the morning that I was supposed to meet Jan, it [the structure of the show] was not clear in my head. And I said to myself: "I do not know what I am going to say to Jan but I know that when I get there--having to say something out of all the muddled things that have been going through my head--something will structure itself." And that is exactly what happened. Once I started to talk, all the extraneous ideas fell away and a whole dynamic thing emerged.[20]

From this first workshopping of ideas, Hall again was granted time to work on the script by himself. He literally went away to the mountains (to Banff, in fact) for several weeks to write and do a lot of the necessary work on the structure of the piece. There were, as Jan Selman remembers, some bizarre early drafts, but eventually a cohesive form emerged. At this point, the cast (with a few changes and additions) was again brought in to continue with the writing: fleshing out their characters and filling in the gaps in the story.

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[20] Hall, panel discussion, August, 1988.

Selman sees this fusion of individual writing and group workshopping to be a key element in the successful development of this script. As she reports,

> ...it's important because this was something we hadn't done much of before and I think it was the reason for Family Portrait taking the shape that it did....giving Tony time--before the first writing phase and between the first writing phase and the next writing phase--to do a lot of structuring work. Not just structure to make it a nice play but structure to make points and have a kind of reflective element built into the form. That's the kind of thing that doesn't happen in a "collective" unless for a time it isn't "collective".[21]

With this project, Catalyst was attempting to change how they worked; attempting to move away from the very open-ended collective and into a process that allowed for a far more focused script. While Hall (as the writer and director) was given time to structure the piece, Jan Selman (as the Artistic Director of the company) took care of the consultation work between Catalyst and AADAC; acting as a kind of interpreter and buffer between the creative process and the funding agency. In retrospect, Selman sees this as a useful situation: "...to allow the writing and creating to be informed by the funding agency, but also to be free of it at times."[22]

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[21] Selman, panel discussion, August, 1988.

Catalyst was finding that the "write to order" kind of situation, that had often been the case in previous shows, was narrowing them artistically. Although, as Selman maintains, this can create a useful tension at times, the actual time constraints of having only a few weeks to write a show on a specified theme often meant that you'd end up writing, what Selman calls, "the straight line version".

In this case, the sponsor did place some restrictions on the project which ultimately had an effect on the creative process. AADAC was extremely eager to incorporate an "after show" discussion into the play. Their feeling was that, having all just seen the play, people would be open and willing to share things in discussion that could ultimately aid in reaching the educational goals of the project. A discussion would facilitate, in a very direct way, the process of applying the issues raised by the play, to the lives of the audience. To accommodate this discussion, they felt that the show had to be relatively short; people are not going to want to stay around for a discussion after they have sat through a show that was several hours in duration. This was a restriction that Catalyst fought against. Basically, AADAC wanted the show to be much shorter than what Catalyst felt the show should be. As Jan Selman points out,

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[22] Jan Selman, personal interview, 6 June, 1988.

> That's an ongoing struggle with the funder. On the one hand you have to educate them about the theatre; you have to educate them about the form: "catalyst" theatre, and what things make it work. And you have to do that at a time when you're still figuring it out. But it's really easy for funding agencies to grab on to concrete, tangible things and hold on for dear life; like length of a show. It's something that they can use to find their way in to talk to you about.[23]

While Catalyst eventually won the battle regarding the length of the show, they could not convince AADAC to give up the notion of an enforced discussion following the performance. Catalyst felt very strongly that, since the show was intended for a general theatre audience, a discussion simply seemed out of place. They felt that, even if the audience was inclined to have a discussion, it likely wouldn't be in that kind of setting, and it wouldn't be immediately following the show. They felt that, in this context, the audience had to be given the option of whether to stay or to go. In Jan Selman's words,

> I feel very strongly that if you want a discussion after a show, you say that this is a participatory event, and you start from the word "go" making it participatory. There are many different ways to do that. You either do that or you give people the option whether to stay or to go. So there is a place for people to go if they want to talk, but they can also leave.[24]

In the end, the enforced discussion that AADAC was so adamant about only lasted through one evening. Immediately following the first performance, an AADAC staff person got up and proceeded to ask people for their comments. There was very little response, and what discussion there was, seemed forced. The whole endeavour was extremely unsuccessful, mainly because it simply did not belong within the setting of a general theatre audience. Consequently, Catalyst was able to convince AADAC, based on that first attempt, that the post-show discussion should be dropped.

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[23] Selman, interview, August, 1987.

[24] Selman, interview, June, 1988.

The experience of deliberating over whether or not to have an after-show discussion and the subsequent length of the show was a valuable one for the entire company. From this point on, they started defining their relationship with the sponsor much more carefully as they went in to shows. The timing of consultation with the sponsor became a crucial factor: defining when it is that you can really listen to the input from the sponsor or funding community--take it and act on it--and when you absolutely cannot. Obviously, to wait until the show is into its final "dress rehearsals" would be too late. On the other hand, to give them a script prior to rehearsals even commencing, would be too early. They would start quibbling about making little insignificant changes: changing one word for another. According to Selman,

> That's a process of exploration that's really important to the relationship to the community, to the funder, and our own ability to live within a lot of funding rules. The better we got at that, the less restrictive (in a negative way) the funding became.[25]

In this case, while AADAC certainly had an influence on the content of Family Portrait, they did not interfere with the creative process of the show's development. With Selman handling all the deliberations and consultations with the sponsor, the workshop cast and director were free to concentrate exclusively on the artistic aspects of the project. The content of the show was thus greatly influenced by the initial workshop actors: Jane Heather, Peggy Lees, and Frank C. Turner. Heather was especially important in that she was born and raised in Alberta and is very respectful of and committed to the Alberta perspective. Turner, also a native Albertan, was key in developing a lot of the politics that became very much a part of the father character. His own interests in the union movements, along with those of Heather, were important influences. Lees was influential in adding her understanding of what it means to be an isolated, bright teenager, living in today's society.

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[25] Selman, interview, August, 1987.

Likewise, director Tony Hall (who was born and raised in Trinidad), in addition to having large input into the form and structure of the piece, also had a significant influence on the show's content. Selman maintains that his mixture of cultural influences allowed him to bring a unique perspective to the project.

> Tony, on the one hand, is a resident of Alberta--is married to someone born in Alberta and therefore is part of a rural Albertan family--but also is from outside and has a kind of ability that anyone going to another culture has: although you're outside on one level, on another level you're able to see that culture in a way that we who are in it can't....The distance at times

helps you and at times it is a huge barrier.[26]

In the second workshop phase, with Frank C. Turner now unavailable, Paul Whitney was brought in to take over the role of the father, and is responsible for much of the humour in the character and in the show in general. An example of some of this inserted comedy can be found early in the play as John (the father) reminisces about his own father (on the eve of his father's funeral). When describing how his father refused to leave the farm in the care of his son, James, so that he and his wife could take a trip to the old country, he says,

> JOHN:
>
> The old man didn't even trust him. In fact James told me he tried to talk him into going over once, and Dad said, "In me own time son, in me own time". [pause] How a man whose family has lived in Canada for two generations had a Scottish accent, I'll never know. Anyway, his time never came....[27]

Later, in a flashback depicting a scene from his courtship with Elizabeth, we find the following dialogue:

> ELIZABETH
>
> ...Where do you work?
>
> JOHN
>
> Nelson Lumber.
>
> ELIZABETH
>
> What do you do?

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[26] Selman, interview, June, 1988.

[27] Catalyst Theatre, Family Portrait, typescript, 1982, p. 8.

JOHN

I'm a pilot.

ELIZABETH

Really?

JOHN

Yeah, pile it here, pile it there.[28]

The fact that Whitney was brought in to take over and further develop a role that had been initially created by Turner, resulted in an interesting fusion of styles. As Jan Selman remembers,

> He [Whitney] developed a lot of the broad comedy, not all of it certainly, but a lot of it comes from him. So there's this strange mix of this serious union guy that was Frank Turner and this sort of broad, "gung-ho", "foot-in-his-mouth" kind of dad which tends to be a lot of Whitney's contribution.[29]

In addition to Whitney, the second workshop group included both Heather and Lees from the first workshop phase, and David Mann in the role of the son. Phil Kuntz was also brought in to work on the music.

Whereas the first workshop cast did a lot of improvising and writing around some concepts and ideas offered by Hall, this group was presented with an entire first draft of a completed script: the outcome of Hall's month-long writing spree. This second workshop group--which eventually became the first performing cast--was able to workshop and to write around what was now a somewhat cohesive structure; a structure which included roughly defined characters and a story with an attempted beginning, middle and end.

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[28] Ibid., p. 14.

[29] Selman, interview, June 1988.

Nevertheless, despite the contributions of Hall, the actual script represented little more than a rough draft. As Jan Selman remembers,

> ...It was a very rough script: the basic concept was there; the first draft of the characters were there--characters that were totally influenced by the people who had been in the first workshop--but there were big gaps and a lot of things that didn't yet tie together.[30]

This second workshop group were thus given a rough script which they, in turn, further workshopped and developed. The music was added at this point, along with a lot more writing.

Kuntz was hired specifically to write the music--based on input both from Hall and from the acting company--as opposed to being part of the collective. As Jan Selman recalls, "It's not that he wasn't part of the collective, but he was a specialist."[31] While the script and the lyrics were written collectively, the music was written exclusively by Kuntz.

The writing--both with the music and the script--was done very quickly in this second workshop, but it was greatly strengthened by the fact that there already existed a strong structural core from which the cast could work.

The music and songs played a major part in establishing the reflective elements of the play. In addition to providing the audience with the opportunity to think about what they had just witnessed in a previous scene, the music worked to structurally and thematically move the play forward. Following the opening scene (John's eulogy to his father), the company breaks with the play's established representational style to stand and present the title song which, among other things, introduces the characters (the family members) by way of a series of posed portraits; the final portrait being symbolically staged and photographed by the musician (Prairie Dan).

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

FAMILY PORTRAIT

When the world was beginning
And the good lord raised his pen
Put a mark on his invention
And the angels asked him then
"Was it always your intention
For the families of Men?"

And the planet started spinning
And the day turned into night
And Thomas Ross was born
And brought his clan into the light
And the family is singing
At a wake for him tonight

The perfect family
Was never meant to be

And the boy will have his money
For the father moulds his son
For the daughter, deathly quiet,
Mothers' work is never done
Every day's a new beginning
Every race still to be won

The perfect family

- Was never meant to be[32]

At this point, Prairie Dan turns to the audience and says: "Ladies and Gentlemen, A Family Portrait..." The four family members sing an harmonic chord and Dan snaps the picture.

According to Selman, the core or centre of Family Portrait comes from an effort to understand what Bertolt Brecht and his followers could teach the company in terms of structure. Brecht's "verfremdungseffekt" theories are very well documented and certainly Catalyst is not the first to try and apply them to an original work. Still, the use of story and music to effectively "distance" the audience and add a reflective element to the play, was something that intrigued Catalyst and also seemed to utilize many of the elements the company had already become quite proficient in creating. It was, in a way, a natural progression. As Jan Selman remembers,

> ...we felt happy about the function that music had played in our work. We wanted to explore what music could do in a Brechtian technique, or a moment of reflection before you move on.[33]

But perhaps the strongest element in the structure of Family Portrait is its use of "story" without losing "arguments". The basic structural frame revolves around a certain family as they are now, interspersed with flashbacks which review not only the events that got them to where they are today, but also the various stages of trying to make the family work. Through this use of flashbacks, the audience is effectually distanced from the emotional impact of the present-time scene, and the arguments this is putting forward become very clear. With the basic scene established of a family visiting together (in 1984) for the first time in quite a long while, we flash-back to various scenes from the past that help to explain and comment upon the family as we see it in the present. For example, there is a point in the first act where Audrey (the daughter) and her mother (Elizabeth) are left alone at the table, while the boy (Scott) and his father (John) go out to the garage to examine some "home improvements". While talking about Scott's and John's relationship, the subject of Audrey's long ago suicide attempt is introduced:

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[32] Family Portrait, p. 3.

[33] Selman, interview, August, 1987.

AUDREY

Maybe it's a good thing they don't see too much of each other.

ELIZABETH

They just can't seem to stay in the same room for more than five minutes. They got along so well when Scott was little.

AUDREY

It's not really so hard to understand. Dad was away a lot and Scott sort of went his own way.

ELIZABETH

It was a difficult time for all of us, but it was no worse for Scott than you, and you seem....

AUDREY

I was older. Besides I handled my feelings in my own way, remember?

At this point the scene flashes back to 1976, with Scott phoning his father (at work) to report Audrey's suicide attempt.

JOHN

Hello?

SCOTT

Dad?

JOHN

Scott, what's going on? [hand over phone] "Don't wait for me, I'll be right back."

SCOTT

Dad?

JOHN

You caught me right in the middle of an election. I've only got a minute.

SCOTT

Oh, well I just thought maybe you'd be interested to know Audrey's in the hospital.

JOHN

In the hospital! What happened, is she hurt?

SCOTT

She's in a coma.

JOHN

Oh Christ, Scott! How'd it happen?

SCOTT

She did it herself, Dad. She took almost a whole bottle of tranquillizers.

JOHN

What? [off] "I'll be right there, Marty." How is she? When did it happen?

SCOTT

She's stable.

JOHN

What the hell does that mean?

SCOTT

I found her around 4:30.

JOHN

That's seven hours ago. Why didn't you call me before?

SCOTT

I've been trying to find you all evening.

JOHN

Look, I'll be there as soon as I can get away, alright?

SCOTT

There's nothing you can do--me and Mom took care of everything. I just thought you'd like to know. [hangs up]

[John hangs up][34]

The scene again jumps back to 1984, as Audrey and Elizabeth try to discuss what happened and why.

This distancing, or objectification of arguments, is accomplished without losing the central story and events, without compromising character. In Jan Selman's opinion,

> That format is really interesting for popular theatre to look at, because in the form it asks you to stop and reflect. You're dealing with a circumstance now that has

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[34] Family Portrait, p. 45-47.

> some problems, and then you go back--in an entertaining way--but you go back and review something that happened then, that meant a lot then, but also reflects on what's happening now. There's a structure where you could discuss over dinner in the present and then go back to the events that were hot and see them. That breaking up--that turning the story around on itself with flashbacks--is a really important form to break up what would otherwise be a totally linear soap opera, and turn it into a tool that asks people to think and reflect on their own situation and their own lives, as well as on that family. The music does that to some extent as well, but the music functions more as a device to hold things together; to make it entertaining and pretty. We often have used music, supposedly as that reflecting device à la Brecht, but I think what people often in fact do is relax and enjoy the music--no matter how pithy the lyrics are--and then get back to the story. The flashback technique moved the story on from being just a soap opera.[35]

Even though they eventually became the first performing cast, the second workshop group had been initially brought together to workshop and to write; to flesh out a completed, yet rough, first draft of a script. They spent the workshop period writing to fill in the gaps and to complete the script; a period in which a lot of these flashback scenes were added. The cast was then given some time away from the project before the actual commencement of rehearsals. This meant that the cast truly began the actual rehearsal period with a completed script in hand. As Jan Selman recalls, this was particularly unusual for Catalyst:

> We finished the script and then we went into rehearsal. But we didn't do that very often at Catalyst. Most shows we were still writing as we walked onto the stage.[36]

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[35] Selman, interview, June, 1988.

[36] Selman, panel discussion, August, 1988.

The fact that there was a completed script for the actors to work from, meant that the director, Tony Hall, could approach the whole rehearsal process in a way that was unusual to Catalyst: concentrating on staging, visual images, pace, rhythm, build, and focus within the scenes. There was also a good portion of time spent practising the music. Likewise, trying to incorporate the flashback technique effectively into the production became a major focus during the rehearsal period. As Tony Hall remembers,

> I had this notion of a certain kind of movement up the steps. Somehow there is a reality that happens down on the floor and when you move back in time to the flashbacks, there is a way that you would go up the steps--sort of sail up the steps--it would have an effect so that it didn't look like the actors were just running up the steps to do another flashback scene. That was just a peculiarity of that particular production. We spent a lot of time directing traffic up and down the steps.[37]

In terms of rehearsal, it is worthwhile to note that each of the cast members were Catalyst veterans of past productions. All of them were quite adept at working in the typical Catalyst fashion: simultaneously researching a topic and transforming that research into the various scenes and characters that would eventually become a show. The rehearsal phase of Family Portrait presented a new challenge to the cast. Could they, in fact, manufacture with a scripted play the same kind of commitment and energy that was so characteristic of other Catalyst collectives? Did they, individually and collectively, have the talent to do all the things that they had set out to do in this production? The music was extremely intricate and was complicated enough to demand good, trained singers; not everyone in the cast could sing that well. The script was by no means simple. It demanded the best actors to play those roles; similarly, not everyone in the cast could act as well as the show required. Yet, there was a kind of commitment with this first cast that enabled them to overcome most of the difficulties they had placed on themselves. It's a commitment and energy that goes with owning a show: creating a show (writing it yourself or being part of the writing process) and believing in what you do. According to Ruth Smillie,

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[37] Hall, panel discussion, August, 1988.

> In terms of rehearsal and production--whether its Theatre By or Theatre With or Theatre For--you need actors who are committed to the work in an analytical framework; to have a social conscience. You can't teach people social conscience. You can expose them to it, but you can't make them learn it. My frustration is often with the orientation that a lot of actors have to their work. Very rarely does an artist ask questions of the script, such as: "What does this say about women?"; "What does this say about the economic system?"; What does this say about workers?"; "What does this say about social justice?"; or any of those issues. Those questions aren't asked. So when you are asking actors to come at their work from the point of view of those questions, it's very difficult for them. Usually their response is: "But I'm just an actor."[38]

Jan Selman knows just how important the level of ownership and commitment can be to a production. As she recalls,

> I've had two really strong experiences with remounts where you are suddenly freed, because most of the cast didn't come back, to cast whoever you want in the roles. And although you can look at them and say these people

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[38] Ruth Smillie, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

> sing better, they act better, they are more suited to their role, whatever, it doesn't have the drive and the commitment that the first cast show did, and so you start to see flaws in the script more. It's a really weird mix.[39]

It's a tension that exists in a lot of Catalyst's work, a tension that occurs because this type of theatre requires people to cover so many bases at once.

> Whether you're a writer--or an actor researching a role that's written, or an actor researching to create a role--you aren't just a vessel that it gets poured through (you aren't a set of skills that it get's poured through), you are an equal human being going out to meet that and being changed by that. They'll only give you as much as you're willing to give and show of yourself. It's taking vulnerability which we all love in actors and demanding that it be part of your process.[40]

While it is true that a lot of the flaws of performance can be covered up by the energy and commitment of the cast, likewise, the dramaturgical weaknesses of the script can be similarly glossed over. A good test of any collective in terms of the actual "play", is to see if anybody else can make it work. Can the play stand up to a remount? When the original personalities are removed, does the play hold up?

Family Portrait is one Catalyst show that has stood the test. It was not only remounted, with a changed cast, by Catalyst, but was independently produced by Kam Theatre in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Although Jan Selman was brought in to direct the show, she did so with an entirely "non Alberta" cast, an entirely different design, and a different kind of musician.

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[39] Selman, interview, June, 1988.

[40] Selman, interview, August, 1987.

From a director's point of view, Selman points out that the characters in Family Portrait are very clear; that the actors don't have any problem deciphering who they are. Likewise, the music holds up extremely well. In terms of content, while Selman readily admits that a lot of Catalyst's work is so localized that it could never go anywhere else, Family Portrait did and it held up quite well. The significance of this is noted by Tony Hall,

> ...If another company takes something like that--that we felt was very close to us here in Alberta--and does it, it means that it has something that is universally significant to Canada. That speaks for itself.[41]

The play's universal significance is closely tied in with the reflective elements that were built into the structure. In Family Portrait, the viewer is confronted with and asked to reflect upon his or her own family. The success of the play's structure is that it doesn't just let you live through the experiences of that family (the family on the stage), it makes you think about how families work. As Jan Selman recalls,

> In the Thunder Bay version, I was really struck with the archetypal family memories. Even though my own family was extremely different from the family in the play, the memory items kept reviving things that had happened for me.[42]

No one would argue the fact that Catalyst has certainly, with previous shows and projects, achieved this level of identification from its audience members: recovering alcoholics have been able to identify with the denial and excuses offered by a character in the midst of a drinking problem; homosexuals have gained inner strength from the realization that they were not alone in their struggle for acceptance in society; illiterate adults have recognized the plight of a character struggling to interpret what is written on a job application form. Still, these shows were all aimed at a particular target audience or select community; consequently then, tying the characters and material directly into the life experiences of these people was a matter of course.

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[41] Tony Hall, personal interview, 25 May, 1987.

[42] Selman, interview, June, 1988.

Family Portrait was aimed at a general theatre-going public. As such, Catalyst had no influence over who should come to see the show. The audience could not be restricted to individuals and groups who had experienced or were experiencing difficulties within their families. Whatever archetypal memories and experiences were to issue from the production, they had to be universally identifiable. The challenge for Catalyst, with its traditional collective process, was to create and perform a play that would appeal to the sensibilities of a general public audience without resorting to the highly entertaining and relatively safe format of a revue.

It is noteworthy that Catalyst, in the creation of this play, did not abandon the many methods and techniques that they had developed and established in previous productions. The procedure by which a show had to be developed and authenticated through extensive research into the chosen subject area was never questioned. The two workshop casts, in collaboration with Hall, relied heavily on research to direct them toward the characters that needed to be established, along with the subject matter and material to be included within the structure of the play itself.

A great deal of emphasis was placed on selecting and assembling the right group of actors; both in the workshopping and performance phases of the production. The actors who were chosen were not only committed to the type of work that Catalyst does--along with the style and manner in which Catalyst creates and mounts productions--but also to the need for this particular show (and its message) to reach a general public audience at this time.

Finally, in true Catalyst fashion, everyone involved in the project was flexible to change and open to the ongoing reworking of all the various aspects of the production: the characters; the script; even the overall structure. Thanks to the extra work that Tony Hall put into the project, the cast was able to workshop and rehearse within a certain loosely structured framework. As a result, there tended to be little time spent sitting down and debating, and more time devoted to translating ideas into theatre. But the interaction and connection with the community did not stop. To a certain extent, the actors and creators of Family Portrait were themselves the community: they all had connections to families. Still, they had to turn their attention and their research outward to the larger community of which they were only one small part; they had to constantly check themselves and what they were creating to make sure that they were getting it right.

In describing the rehearsal and production techniques of Catalyst Theatre, it is probably this one feature (the constant and continual connection with the community) that sets Catalyst apart from most other theatre companies. Within the chosen community exists not only the reason for the project or production, but also the answer to the ways and means that must be employed to accomplish the task. For the creators and for the target community, there is as much value in the "process" of mounting a production, as there is in the actual finished product. According to Jan Selman,

> One of the reasons, in my view now, that you'd even bother to do a collective is because of the social interaction--both in the making of the play and the presenting of the play--between a community and the actors. Otherwise, there's better playwrights around. That's one of the reasons for being truly in the community: because of those kinds of things that happen, and because you're seen as vulnerable as well as polished. It's seen that you work eight hours a day; you're known. This comes back to the principle that you give back what you take, and the only way that you can do this is to be as vulnerable yourself as you are asking them to be with you.[43]

The actor/creator's involvement in the chosen community is key to the qualitative nature of what is gained through the research. With this type of work, the people within the targeted community can never be second guessed. They are the ones that know, not the actors. But in order to get someone within the chosen community to confide with someone who is outside the community--someone who is a total stranger--the actor must work to gain the respect and trust of that individual.

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[43] Selman, interview, August, 1987.

A valuable lesson learned in the first production, Drinks Before Dinner, was that, based solely on research and experience, it is impossible to "get it right" without ongoing consultation with the community. It doesn't matter how much you know about theatre and its power to move and engage an audience--it doesn't matter how talented a performer you might be--if you're not in communication with the chosen community, there's no point in doing the production. The ongoing consultation means that, as a theatre company, you develop a process by which you spend some time with the community; you go away for a time and work on what you have learned; you then return to the community to authenticate what you have been working on; you get suggestions for change; you go away and make those changes; you return to the community; and so on. The process is an effective way of ensuring that you are not only getting the right material and the best material out of the community, but you are articulating it in the most effective way possible. And since the company knows theatre, then it follows that theatre and theatre techniques should be the medium utilized to get the input from the chosen community.

As Selman says,

> In terms of rehearsal, this is probably one of the most radical steps that we took: to change consultation with a community from talk--of course you still have to talk--but change it into theatre. So the actual research is done with theatre. An example of this from the prison show (It's About Time, 1983) would be: "O.K., we're fish. We're newcomers and we're in the cafeteria for the first time. You guys have been here for a year; you know the ropes. Set it up for us and we'll just come in. We don't know what to expect." It's research. We didn't put a scene in about being fish in the cafeteria, but boy did we learn a lot about prisons and about being new. It's so much better than simply saying: "So, what's your cafeteria like?"[44]

Through the use of role-play, select persons within the target community are given the opportunity to "suspend their disbelief" willingly and pretend they are responding to an actual situation that would be familiar to them. They may be sceptical at first, but if the actors can maintain their concentration and play their roles with conviction, the person in the community should eventually start to open up.

Another option is to go into the community with a purposefully rough scene and present it to a select assembly for their opinions. It doesn't matter how polished the scene might actually be, the intention is to give the audience the impression that it is still in progress. According to Selman,

> ...You make it rough on purpose. In doing so, you signal to them that the scene is rough and open for change. Even if everyone knew the scene and didn't need their script, I'd give someone a script. Because it says: "Oh right. They're just sort of learning it now. Nothing is precious." I'd have some actress stop and say: "Sorry, what scene is next?"...Everything's open. It's all a great wonderful experiment. Let's play. You get the

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[44] Ibid.

audience opening up and telling personal stories.[45] This is precisely what transpired in the initial presentation of Drinks Before Dinner. Because the show was rough and unpolished in its presentation, nobody considered it so sacred that it couldn't be changed and adapted to mirror more precisely the lives and events of the target audience.

The method of presentation that was utilized in Drinks Before Dinner--a show that was targeted for a specific audience--was "Theatre For". Catalyst Theatre continues to create and mount shows and projects in this "presentational" mode, as it has proven to be a powerful and useful medium for effecting education and change within a chosen community. Likewise, as is the case with shows like Family Portrait, "Theatre For" is the preferred method of presentation for projects aimed at a general public audience.

Current Artistic Director, Ruth Smillie, is committed to raising Catalyst's public profile once more by commissioning and collaborating on an increasing number of projects intended for the general public. Smillie is a strong advocate of the methodology that was incorporated in the creation of Family Portrait. She believes strongly in the role of the writer in theatre, whether it be the type of theatre that is practised by Catalyst, or any other theatre. What she sees as unique about Catalyst, is that projects are given a great deal of time to be developed and researched. In discussing the development of the 1988 presentational theatre production, David for Queen, she reports that the research on the project took about eight months.

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[45] Ibid.

> The reason that was so important is that the research process itself determined what kind of show we were going to do. Initially we had thought that maybe there was a way of using metaphors or something to disguise the content of the material so that it would be acceptable in the High School setting. But what became very clear to us was that, first of all, that wouldn't be acceptable to the schools, and secondly, that it was very important not to use any kind of disguises; that the public needed to have that issue front and centre: that kids--their parents, teachers, the community at large--needed access to that kind of information. It was at that point that we decided to commission a full length play for public production from John Lazarus.[46]

Under Smillie's leadership, Catalyst has moved away from doing the traditional "collective creation" that has been characteristic of the company for much of its history. She prefers, instead, to use actors as collaborators in the research and development phases of a production; using what they gain from their research to inform a commissioned playwright. The playwright provides the actor/researchers with a series of drafts that can be workshopped and tested in the community. The results of this testing and workshopping is again fed back to the playwright; and so the process continues until the actors are provided with a completed script with which they can go into rehearsal.

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[46] Smillie, interview, February, 1988.

CHAPTER III

THEATRE "WITH"

"Understanding by doing rather than by seeing"[1] is the overall goal or purpose of "Theatre With". This style of theatre is also called "Participatory Theatre". In this context, the word "participatory" is meant to designate the type of theatre where audience members become directly involved in the performance, from interacting by means of discussion or by offering suggestions to getting up on stage to replace a character and to play out an idea.

Some types of participatory theatre ask the audience members to assume various roles and participate in a very active way throughout the entire production. In this case, actors create a simulated environment and situation, asking the audience to "willingly suspend their disbelief" and totally absorb themselves in the simulation. Audience members are forced to make decisions and deal with the consequences of their actions and choices.

Having your audience learn by actively making choices, implementing their ideas--or having actors implement them on behalf of the audience--is the overall purpose of participatory theatre. As Jan Selman writes,

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[1] John O'Toole, Theatre in Education: New Objectives for Theatre--New Techniques in Education, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1976).

> When a theatre event includes the audience in an active way, the opportunity for concrete learning is very high. Audience members learn by doing. ...theatre can create a sense of fun and at the same time provide an environment in which trying out new ideas and skills is comfortable and feedback is immediate.[2]

While it can be argued that all types of theatre seek to engage the audience in the action and subject matter of what is happening on the stage, participatory theatre aspires to engage its audience in a far more active and explicit way, using this overt involvement as a tool for problem solving and learning.

Catalyst's participatory theatre is always created with this educational purpose in mind. Plays or projects are specifically designed to invoke audience response and involvement.

When one talks about the evolution of participational theatre in Catalyst's history, it is important to look at two significant participational projects that were developed by the company. The Black Creek Project and Project Immigration are important in that they both attempt to immerse their audience in intricately orchestrated simulations. Here the audience are given well defined roles to play from the start and are expected to pretend that what is happening is real.

The Black Creek Project, first produced in the spring of 1978, was developed along the lines of the "Theatre in Education" model from the United Kingdom.

This type of play is...based on the premise that through

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[2] Jan Selman, Theatre for Education and Change, (AADAC Publication), p. 17.

> physical participation the students become so intellectually and emotionally involved in the drama that they are able to reach personal decisions about the issues involved, and are stimulated to intense intellectual reflection on these issues once the drama is over.[3]

This show is of significance in that it marks the beginning of a particular line or thread of participational theatre developed by Catalyst--a form somewhat distinct from that of later participational shows like the 1980 production, Stand Up For Your Rights--and stands as a definite forerunner to such landmark shows as Project Immigration (1979).

The mandate for The Black Creek Project again came from the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC). Having sponsored the initial 1977 Drinks Before Dinner project, AADAC, armed with a new budget year and a desire to reach the youth of our society with a message about "prevention" and "lifestyle", commissioned Catalyst to develop a show for a Junior High audience.

Once again, the core of the acting company was to be recruited from David Barnet's senior improvisation class. This time, however, the show was developed outside class time, immediately following the academic school year. Sandra Balcovske was contracted to direct and was later joined by Kevin Burns, who was brought in because of his experience in Theatre in Education. David Barnet acted in an advisory capacity and was freely consulted throughout the formulation of ideas and rehearsal phases.

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[3] Report on The Black Creek Project, (AADAC Publication, 1978).

At the outset of the rehearsal period, other than the knowledge that the project was intended to teach Junior High students something about lifestyle and making choices, none of the actual form or content was as yet formulated. As Barnet remembers,

> We were completely ignorant. We knew that we wanted to create something with children which was very similar to the reaction that certain audiences had with Drinks Before Dinner. Some of the audiences watched Drinks Before Dinner with an electrified atmosphere. ...We wanted to get the same kind of dynamic immediacy with kids, and it happened in Black Creek.[4]

The cast came up with a number of ideas on what shape the show should take, but none seemed quite right. Finally, they hit upon the idea of a participational piece, simulating a northern pipeline construction camp. The students (the intended audience) were to be given costumes--identifying which work crew they were representing--and they would be given the task of actually constructing a facsimile of a pipeline within the confines of their school gymnasium. The students were assigned to any one of the six actors, each of whom had assumed key roles within the framework of this simulated environment. Three actors were foremen of a work crew; one actress was the woman in command of merchandising to the camp; another, the on-sight manager; and finally, one actor played a visiting executive from the company's head office in Edmonton.

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[4] David Barnet, personal interview, 7 August 1987.

The students, usually a day or two in advance of the actors' arrival at a school, would receive a pre-visit from someone who was supposedly representing the camp. This person would show the students slides of the camp and describe the type of work done there. The students then filled out application forms for employment at the camp. From these, the actors would chose their groups.

> This pre-visit establishes the basic rules of the drama--"let's believe", and communicates all the information necessary before the start of the drama, and helps establish belief. The answers the students give on their application form help the actors divide them into management or outside work crews. And their names can now be written onto their pay books and inside their hard hat, and also be known to their foreman, all factors in building belief.[5]

The actual show would begin with the actors coming into the classroom, introducing themselves, and reading out the names of all the members of their respective groups. As each group was announced, they would gather around their actor/leader and together proceed to the gym (the work site). Once there, they would be given the appropriate costume: identifying the type of role they were playing and whose group they were a part of. The three construction crews would then set about the task of building the pipeline, while the others prepared themselves for the variously scheduled interventions that were to transpire during the course of the roughly structured play.

After a number of false starts, the cast, along with

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[5] Report on The Black Creek Project.

Barnet, knew instinctively that this was the right idea to pursue. However, because this area of "theatre in education" was so new to the cast and director alike, they felt the need to solicit outside opinions. As Barnet remembers,

> ...we did a run-through of the idea and brought in a team of people to watch it....They criticised a lot of the things that we wanted to do, but I also knew, intuitively, that they were quite wrong. I'm sure that they maintained that the students shouldn't have costumes and that there shouldn't be real tools and a real pipeline, but I was absolutely sure that everyone had to have costumes, hard-hats and so on....I felt that the putting on of the hat and the putting on of the work-shirt, was a ritual; it was just like playing dress-up as a kid.[6]

The cast held fast to their concept of what the show should be and scrambled to get a set constructed, buy costumes, and prepare the pre-show package. In rehearsal, they were able to develop and flesh out their characterizations (the roles that they were playing) but, because of the complete participational nature of the show, the cast could never really rehearse the show in its entirety. They interrupted their rehearsal schedule and arranged a number of preview performances of the play, with selected Junior High classes participating in the simulation. They then carefully analyzed and evaluated these previews, and made a number of appropriate structural changes for the subsequent tour of the play. All such decisions, regarding the structure and content of the play, were made as a group; each cast member sharing equally in the decision-making process.

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[6] Barnet, interview, August, 1987.

> The Black Creek Project was driven out of a collective awareness--all the actors were working hard to make it all work. Such a show, which was so real, did not come out of one person's consciousness; not one person said this is how the show should be.[7]

What is worthwhile noting here is that they were learning about "participation"--making valuable discoveries--while they were in performance. In this case, they didn't see the actual "hands-on" work by the students as being something that they could effectually rehearse away from the actual audience for whom it was intended.

Nevertheless, the production was amazingly successful and proved to be a powerful medium in terms of educational potential for this particular age group. Responses from students and teachers alike were extremely positive.

> Experiencing and directly participating in any kind of learning experience brings greater awareness and understanding than is possible in the classroom. (Teacher Evaluation)[8]

> I felt as though the drama was a completely new experience. To be part of the play, I think, helps you realize more of what is going on. (Grade 9 Student)[9]

Similar to Black Creek, Project Immigration evolved in a very interesting fashion. Of all the Catalyst shows, it was perhaps the one with the most undetermined topic. It came out of a Government Works grant to, quite simply, "create theatre for children". There was no stated topic or form other than the fact that Catalyst entered into the project with the desire to extend their "participational" work.

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[7] Ibid.

[8] Final Report, Black Creek.

[9] Ibid.

> And that gave us an awful lot of freedom to say: "What should be done?" We knew that we had a social responsibility type mandate and that we would be taking it into schools, but what are the issues? It did not get defined by kids. It got defined by a lot of things, but primarily it grew out of the personal interests of the group. Tony and I pushed the notion that it was about "being different"; about the right to be different. I think we very quickly as a group decided that it would be about the right to not be a part of the majority, and that it would be participational, but as far as the topic was concerned, it was totally open. I think that let it, on one level, become something very important, because we were free to explore the form, rather than meet somebody else's requirements about the content.[10]

Able to develop a show to its fullest "participational" potential, Catalyst came up with a form or structure that allowed the participants--in this case, elementary school children--to be the decision makers. The participants were to be given the roles of Immigration Officers; the actors would play characters of various ethnic backgrounds, all trying to immigrate to Canada. The way it was structured, the students, unable to let everybody in, were forced to make the decisions as to who should be excluded and who should be included. Catalyst had learned, by this point, that the process of this type of participation involved getting people into role, building belief in that role, telling them what was going to happen and then investing them with power.

Once the form was established, the most significant and perhaps difficult element of rehearsal was "character building" from research. They had to establish all these different immigrant characters and make them believable. Jan Selman acknowledges that, in terms of research, it wasn't easy for the actors.

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[10] Jan Selman, personal interview, 7 August 1987.

> We had mostly non-actors; we had teacher/actors and we didn't have strong character people...so determining what characters they could play that were legitimately immigrants was part of our whole process. We did a lot of interviewing, character building--through research and then interview--and then story building. A big emphasis, and I think this is important in any participational form, is that you give every actor the chance to create a life biography--not just facts like this happened when I was fourteen and this happened when I was twenty--but actually being able to tell meaningful stories from your life: things that formed who you are. You need those because one of the major techniques in animating through role is saying "yes and" or "yes but" through stories. You needed story anyway, on a simpler level, just to involve the kids in discovering who the character was. We developed endless stories. Some of that developed in rehearsal and some of that after we had been out doing the show for awhile.[11]

The creation and development of strong, believable characters is a crucial aspect of the research and rehearsal phase of any "participational" theatre piece. This is true, of course, of rehearsals for most types of theatrical productions, but is of prime importance here. For one thing, it is something that can be rehearsed. Usually, the form and structure of a participational show can only be formulated and discussed; it is difficult to rehearse these aspects away from the actual population for whom it is intended. But developing a character, based on research and depending on the purpose and anticipated form of the production, is something actors can grasp and in which they can actively and practically participate.

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[11] Ibid.

Not only can the rehearsal and production techniques of a "participational" theatre event be markedly different than those of a strictly "presentational" play, but the formulation and creation of the ideas behind the show are likewise uniquely developed. As Jan Selman writes,

> When professionals create participatory theatre they do so with a view to eliciting audience response. They seek to engage audience members in group problem solving and/or skill development. After researching the intended audience, they define the challenge points, or teaching points. Scenes are created which best encourage audience participation and which focus the audience's attention upon the identified issues. Actors become actor/teachers or animators.[12]

This quotation describes, in a very brief and concise way, the overall creative process in the formulation and subsequent development of another of Catalyst's participational shows: Stand Up For Your Rights. All of the ideas and efforts of the director and the cast--including all the research and rehearsal--were aimed at creating a show where the audience would be challenged to look at and examine certain key issues that were deemed important to them.

Stand Up For Your Rights was commissioned by The Alberta Association for the Mentally Retarded (now known as the Alberta Association for the Mentally Handicapped) as part of a legal workshop that they were holding at various locations throughout the province. The workshop was specifically intended for parents and professionals who worked with mentally handicapped individuals. As part of that seminar, they wanted to include a workshop for the actual participation of mentally handicapped adults themselves. According to Jan Selman, their reason for the inclusion of this component was...

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[12] Selman, Theatre for Education and Change.

> partly out of a social responsibility, and partly because they had been told that parents wouldn't come unless there was something there for the mentally handicapped person in their family to attend as well.[13]

The organizers were well aware that the main workshop they had designed would not be appropriate for the mentally handicapped. As a result, Catalyst Theatre was contracted to create and develop something that could captivate and entertain this audience, and, at the same time, teach them something about the subject matter of the overall workshop. As Tony Hall remembers,

> We decided that the thing to do was to create something that had the qualities of theatre and--rather than trying to do a workshop with them--make the presentation something that they could be engaged in as well.[14]

So in the beginning, the show was intended to be as much a workshop as it was a theatrical performance. Everything was created and planned for the participation of the mentally handicapped audience.

> It was one of the few times where the sponsor really wanted something, and they didn't know what, so they knew they should maybe try us. It was quite early in our career too. ...It's interesting, because in the initial request it was called a workshop because they thought the

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[13] Selman, interview, August 1987.

[14] Tony Hall, personal interview, 25 May 1987.

> mentally handicapped people learned by doing, not by being told things; and it was theatre because it included role play; and it was felt that it should repeat. These were all things that were said to us initially.[15]

The topic was the legal rights of the handicapped: "the mentally handicapped and the law". Certainly, an exploration into what precisely were the legal rights of the handicapped defined the initial research for the show and to facilitate this aspect of the research, the Association had furnished the actors with a number of law books and regulations concerning the mentally handicapped. They also identified some key areas and issues that they felt were important and in need of being addressed. For instance, Tony Hall notes that they specifically felt that the issue of "getting married" was an important one for this population, a topic which was eventually dealt with in a scene on the mentally handicapped person's right to independence.

Although the cast had conversed with counsellors and professionals and been given a good deal of useful advice about the mentally handicapped, they found that they couldn't really act on this advice until they themselves had spent some time with this population and discovered the information directly. In fact, until they had spent a considerable amount of time with these people, they would have no clear understanding of how to put their message across, of what type of theatre was going to reach these people. This population was unlike any that Catalyst had ever played to before. They realized that the type of material they had developed in previous shows and projects would be entirely inappropriate for this population. There was nothing they could imitate or repeat; they had to come up with something new. The cast entered into the project with a good deal of uncertainty.

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[15] Jan Selman, panel discussion with Tony Hall & Jane Heather, 3 August, 1988.

> We knew that we would be creating some kinds of scenes, but the problem of how we were going to do these scenes so that they could follow them--how we were going to know what they were understanding--was not immediately apparent. We had something like an hour and a half to fill and we didn't know how we would keep their attention for that amount of time.[16]

With this project, it was somewhat out of necessity as well as by design, therefore, that the cast spent a large part of their research and rehearsal time visiting and interacting with mentally handicapped individuals, both in groups and in "one on one" situations.

In the initial stages of this research, the cast found communication with this population to be difficult. Much of the problem grew out of the cast's own lack of knowledge and understanding with regard to this specific interest group. The situation is firmly implanted in Tony Hall's memory, specifically because it was so difficult for him.

> I remember going to a home for the mentally handicapped and sitting in the living room with a group and really finding it very difficult to communicate. I suppose I was sort of afraid of my own reactions and that worked as an obstacle to communication. I remember wondering: "What are we going to do? How are we going to engage these people in some kind of meaningful dialogue and

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[16] Hall, interview, May 1987.

> achieve something?" Of course I knew nothing about mentally handicapped people. That process began through just meeting mentally handicapped adults, talking to their families, and initially just dealing with our reaction to the mentally handicapped people and wondering if we could do it. So this is a situation where the very first people that we had to confront were not the mentally handicapped people, but ourselves--misconceptions that we had about who we were and our ability to deal with the handicapped; to deal with people who were different.[17]

Getting over their own prejudices and limitations was the first obstacle for the cast. Once this was accomplished they concentrated on carefully observing the activities of this population: how they spent their leisure time; how their day was spent; what their lives were like. This was accomplished, for the most part, by simply spending time and talking with mentally handicapped individuals.

Jane Heather tells of a time that she went to visit a young mentally handicapped woman who was living on her own in an apartment complex specifically set up for this population.[18] She was terrified of the concept of being "one on one" with this individual because of her uncertainty of how they would communicate; how she should proceed with an interview. She recalls that for much of the interview, she had a tremendous amount of difficulty in understanding this young woman, but eventually, the woman brought out a stack of "Playgirl" magazines and started flipping through the pages of naked men; pointing and laughing hysterically. For Jane, it represented a kind of breakthrough. Obviously, this woman didn't see Jane as an authority figure or counsellor who might be checking up on her, but rather as a friend, someone she could trust. Jane also realized from this display of intimacy and trust, that sexuality was certainly an issue for this population, an issue that later figured prominently in certain scenes of the show.

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Jane Heather, personal interview, 12 June 1989.

The eventual show was comprised of four simple scenes dealing with issues facing mentally handicapped adults: living independently (the right to get married and have children); applying for a job; getting fired; and defying parental authority. There were two other scenes that didn't survive: renting an apartment; and buying on "credit". The action of each scene is structured to build to a point of crisis, where a character (a mentally handicapped person) is confronted with a problem or is forced to make a major decision. These decisions are not easy for the character, thus the audience is conscripted to help the person come to a resolution.

Arguably the most interesting thing about this show is its form. The form developed, to a large extent, because of the special attributes of the audience for whom it was intended. The actors' growing understanding and appreciation of this particular audience seemed to directly correspond with their formulation of ideas on what form the show should take. As Tony Hall remembers,

> We noticed that they liked looking at games on the T.V.: hockey and basketball and so on. They liked action.

> They had to participate all along the way. We felt that if we could just set up the scenes simply as games and stop the scenes and have them sort of make interventions in the scenes--if we could actually get them to be the ones to propel the scenes and make the choices in the scenes--then they would be involved and we would know what they were getting out of all this.[19]

Jan Selman concurs and notes that their research had clearly shown them this was a population that liked games.

> That population needs to repeat things more than once in order to get it. In fact, they need practice doing it. They can't just hear it and say 'oh yeah'; they need repeated practice. So you see how the--"round and round we go"; "let's try again on this"; "let's have you try and solve it and then let's have me try to solve it with your solutions"--form comes right out of who that audience is. In fact, some of those principles were picked up and used with other populations, but we only discovered them because this was such an extreme population.[20]

The significant development emerging from the research on this particular show was the realization that the form of the show was easily as important as its actual content. How it was said was as influential as what was being said. The communication for this particular audience was definitely happening more in the "theatre" of the show, than in the "message" or "content" of the show.

Tony Hall points out that the actual scripting of the play took very little time to complete. Picking up on the idea of games, the cast designed a show where the handicapped could intervene; could stop the action at any point and disagree with what was being presented and/or make suggestions as to what should happen. This intervention was facilitated through a character that they called the "referee". They dressed this character up in a ridiculous looking hat with an extra long visor, gave the person a huge whistle on a string and some red flags that could be thrown down, and instructed the audience to watch for and inform the referee of any "fouls" they felt were committed. A "foul" was anything that they as individuals in the audience felt was unfair or unjust in the way that the handicapped people were being treated or depicted in the scenes. In a sense, the handicapped people became responsible for keeping the show going. As Tony Hall notes,

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[19] Hall, interview, May 1987.

[20] Selman, interview, August 1987.

> Once we had created a situation where the handicapped could stop a scene anytime they wanted to--whether we understood why they stopped it or not (and we had a process of questioning them why they stopped it)--then the next step became fairly obvious because the next step would come from them. Which is why, when we really got communicative with the handicapped, a show that used to have four or five scenes--or four or five games as we would lay them out--ended up having one. We got so communicative with the handicapped, and they got so into it, that we debated as to whether it was more valuable to ignore some of these interruptions and get the games over with so that we could cover all four games or topics, or whether it would be just as valuable to just do one on something like independence for instance. This is something that we never quite resolved, but what was significant here was the research was about creating the theatre, because the message was in the working of the theatre.[21]

It has often been said of Catalyst that their work represents an eclectic borrowing of methods, forms, and techniques from around the world. The participational aspects of Stand

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[21] Hall, interview, May 1987.

Up For Your Rights, for instance, bear some strong similarities to what is known as the "Forum Theatre" of Augusto Boal.

Through Boal's forum theatre technique, audience members are presented with a presentation of a roughly structured scenario and asked to look for situations and moments where they feel someone is being oppressed. In the initial presentation, no audience intervention is allowed: the scenario is played through without interruption. They are told, however, that the same scenario will be replayed, at which time they will have the opportunity to stop the action, identify who is being oppressed at that moment, subsequently replace the actor playing that oppressed person, and offer their idea of a solution to the problem as they see it.

These interventions are facilitated by a character known as "the joker". According to Boal,

> ...all the theatrical possibilities are conferred upon the "Joker" function: he is magical, omniscient, polymorphous, and ubiquitous. On stage he functions as a master of ceremonies, "raisonneur", "kurogo", etc. He makes all the explanations, verified in the structure of the performance...[22]

Somewhat similar to the referee in Stand Up, the joker recognizes whenever an audience member wants to stop the action, brings the person up on stage, questions them about who they feel is being oppressed (who they want to replace), makes the necessary arrangements to replace the original actor with the audience member, and restarts the action from an appropriate point. The joker then allows the audience member to play through their idea of how to resolve the problem before they again stop the action. This accomplished, the joker animates a brief discussion on what the audience member was trying to do and whether or not the attempt was positive and/or effective. Through this animation, the joker not only talks to the person who has come up on stage with the idea, but also to the other characters that may be affected by this person's intervention. The joker may also consult the audience on how effectual they felt the intervention was. At this point the audience member is thanked and goes back to their seat; the replaced actor returns and the scene picks up from where it left off.

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[22] Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed, trans. Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), p. 182.

There are several important and distinct differences between the participational aspects of Stand Up and the Forum Theatre of Boal. In Stand Up, the scene is never played through without the possibility for audience intervention. Rather, the audience members are told, from the start, that they are to look for fouls and have the referee stop the scene whenever they feel that one has been committed.

Another difference between Stand Up and Boal's Forum Theatre formula is in the nature of the audience's participation. The referee in Stand Up does not make direct mention of the possibility that an audience member may come up on stage and replace an actor. He or she simply states, at the outset, that the audience is to point out fouls to the referee; no mention is made of what measures the referee will take in an attempt to correct the foul. In other words, an audience member may call a foul and have the referee stop the action. The referee would then question the audience member on why they thought the action should be stopped (what the foul was) as well as interview them on suggestions that they might have for dealing with this foul. The referee may then direct these suggestions to the actors, asking them to implement them and to replay that portion of the scene. On the other hand, the referee may choose instead to question other audience members, first of all, to determine if there is any consensus on whether or not a foul has been committed, and, secondly, to seek out some more advice. It is totally up to the referee's discretion whether or not any or all of these suggestions be given to the actors for implementation into the scene. There may come a point where somebody, being totally frustrated that the actor can't get a particular suggestion right, is chosen to replace the actor in the scene and thus allowed to play their suggestions through personally. In this sense, the audience participation in Stand Up evolves and grows as the show (or scene) progresses.

Perhaps the most significant difference between this show and those following the Boal formula is in the effect the audience intervention has upon any subsequent playing of the scene. In Forum Theatre, once the audience members have played out their ideas and returned to their seats, the original actors come back and continue with the scene as if there had been no intervention. In other words, the original scene does not change as a result of audience intervention. In Stand Up, however, audience intervention--whatever form it may take--has a direct effect on where the scene will go. In effect, the scene is shaped and determined by what the audience offers to the referee. The actors must be constantly improvising and adapting to whatever suggestions are thrown their way.

This is an important distinction as it gives credence to the fact that the actors and director in this case were not simply trying to implement an existing formula onto a new issue or a new population. The participational aspects of the show clearly evolved along with the cast's growing understanding of this particular population (the mentally handicapped) and their subsequent and ongoing experimentation with "audience intervention" as a valid theatrical form.

Significant as well in the development of the show was the company's growing understanding of "how" participation can work. Even though the show was intended to educate its audience on the subject of the mentally handicapped and the law, the more the cast got into the form and the exploration of how participation worked, the less they worried about the legal details. Whenever information was needed the referee could provide it. In other words, the audience could be making all sorts of decisions about a character's right for independence--based on the scene that they were watching and participating in--but there was often legal information that was required in order for this character to pursue her independence. The referee was the person to provide that information.

In a sense, the form pushed the cast away from the topic. Originally, the show was a collection of a number of different scenes: scenes dealing with situations and things that had conceivably happened to the mentally handicapped in their lives that they could react to and question. But as the participational aspects of the show became more clearly understood and more honestly played, the longer each scene took to play. Finally, some scenes were no longer used at all. Jan Selman remembers,

> Certain scenes survived, of course, because we all liked them better: they were gutsier; they were more difficult (both ethically and humanly); and they were less dry. The right to have an apartment, while not a particularly dry topic, is not as exciting as "What if I get fired?"; or as exciting as "What if I want to get married?"[23]

The fact that the form pushed the cast away from the topic was, in Selman's opinion, to everyone's benefit. Ultimately it was extremely beneficial to the mentally handicapped audience for whom it was intended. Of all the shows that Catalyst has done, in her words "...that show was one of the most specifically useful to the audience that came; and it had some of the longest lasting effects."[24]

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[23] Selman, interview, August 1987.

The show's vast potential for effecting long-lasting change did not come without a certain amount of controversy. Even before the cast had firmly settled on the form that the show would take--before they had actually begun playing the scenes to a mentally handicapped audience--they had the opportunity to preview some of their material to a group of parents whose sons and daughters were mentally handicapped. Selman recalls the significance of that night,

> In St. Paul, by special request, we played one scene to the parents, ahead of working with the handicapped people. It was the scene that dealt with sterilization or the right to have children. There was much controversy with the scene, but one of the results was that, out of all that controversy, there was a sex education program initiated for mentally handicapped adults. That's another good example where a scene was not doctrinaire. It didn't say "you've got the right so go have kids"; it said "you have the right, but you have a lot of responsibility with that and you have to do a lot of deciding about whether you are able to take on that responsibility."[25]

Another facet of the research and rehearsal phase of this project dealt with deciding how the actors would depict or "play" the mentally handicapped people. In much of Catalyst's work up until this point the procedure of creating characters had followed the lines of "Documentary Theatre". In other words, actors would usually base their characterizations on the people they had met while researching the topic or subject area of the show. In collective shows like Drinks Before

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[24] Ibid.

[25] Jan Selman, personal interview, 25 November, 1985.

Dinner, there was a strong attempt for the actor to remain as truthful and honest to the actual character as he or she could. In shows where the characters were, for the most part, fictitious, there was still a push to make the created characters "true to type". In other words, if a certain character in The Black Creek Project is supposed to be a chronic alcoholic, then the actor's depiction of that character has to attempt to be truthful to the symptoms and attributes of someone in that stage of the disease.

But in Stand Up For Your Rights the actors agonized over whether or not they should even attempt to accurately depict the physical attributes of the mentally handicapped individuals that they had met. Were they going to act out speech impediments and the like? To answer the question they again had to look introspectively at themselves. They decided that everyone is handicapped in some way or other. However, there exists an accepted norm for functioning in our society. Society arbitrarily decides what that norm is. According to Tony Hall, some of us fit in and some of us don't.

> There are many of us who just get away. There are many of us who have limited perceptions in some areas but those limitations are not important to what the society considers to be the main skills that you have to have to exclude you from certain activities. But people considered to be mentally handicapped are limited in those particular areas that the society measures in that way. They may be fully capable in other areas. We found that, in many cases, the handicap was in the area of formulating the ideas and the perceptions in the head, into language. A lot of them were too slow and when it was formulated into language, the language was not clear. So the slowness was not in their ability to understand or their ability to think, the slowness was in their ability

> to make others know that you understand and that you can think.[26]

The actors felt, therefore, that there was no need for them to garble their speech or to dribble. Rather, they made a very important distinction between the way they depicted the handicapped person and the way that society treats these individuals. For the purposes of this play, they decided that the handicapped person was the person to whom some injustice is done. When put into the concept of a scene they made it very clear that the particular person is not necessarily handicapped, but rather is being treated as if they were handicapped; victimized because they are not following the behavioral norm.

So if somebody is pushed aside or ridiculed because they are seen as being stupid or incompetent, then that is identified as somebody doing an injustice to somebody else. Those instances were what the referee referred to as "fouls"; those were the situations that the audience members were asked to identify to the referee so that he or she could stop the action and receive suggestions as to what was happening and what could be done to alleviate the situation. The audience would recognize those situations as things that had happened to them. The actors didn't need to twist up their faces or garble their speech in order for the audience to understand who they were supposed to be in the scene. The audience would immediately identify with the situation as it was presented--the occurrences of injustice--and readily point out what was happening, to whom it was happening, and why.

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[26] Hall, interview, May 1987.

Clearly, this show was shaped and formed out of the actors' growing understanding of their audience. In this research and rehearsal phase, the actors had to explore and make decisions on how the theatre would function. As Tony Hall points out, the actors had to come to an understanding of "how the learning process and the consciousness developing process would work."[27] They needed to first ascertain how the mentally handicapped learn and understand, and then create a theatre that would facilitate that learning and understanding.

> So the mechanism of the show--the action of the show--is created or shaped by our understanding of how they learn. Of course, part of that mechanism and how it works is reflected in the improvisatory style of the show. The show had to work in such a way that if a mentally handicapped person were watching the show and suddenly went "Ah huh!", the show had to take that into consideration and say "Ah huh what?", because that instant was important.[28]

Because the form of the show depended so much on the interventions of the audience--in effect, the show was designed to be virtually controlled by the audience--it was difficult to rehearse the scenes away from any kind of performance situation. In fact, according to Hall, the actual scripting was never really written down, and very little actual "rehearsal" of the scenes ever took place. What they did need to have was a clear understanding of how to keep the theatrical framework moving; how to keep the excitement of the "game" which they had identified as being an important component to the learning process. As Hall reports,

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

> We needed something to constantly keep them involved. The character of the referee had to have a certain energy and movement, whereas the actors could remain more realistic.[29]

At this point in the evolution of Catalyst Theatre, the company was still in the early stages of exploring and making discoveries about "participation". The question of how to rehearse the participational aspects of a show was being looked at in a very practical sense; it was literally being discovered as the show itself was taking shape.

In the first mounting of Stand Up For Your Rights, the show had only eight performances and these were spread out over a three month period (March through May, 1980). The extra time that the cast had between performances allowed them the chance to evaluate extensively the success of the show and to think of ways that they could push the participational form even further.

In February of 1981 the show was remounted and played a total of twenty-one performances. As Jan Selman remembers,

> We went into the remount of Stand Up For Your Rights with everyone feeling very clear that the step of going

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[29] Ibid.

further with the participation had to be a priority.[30] The show now consisted of the four roughly structured scenarios, each of which were only about a dozen lines in length. In the beginning, the cast felt that they needed to get through all four of their planned scenarios in order to adequately cover all of the necessary information and complete the show. However, with each successive performance the cast attempted to become less rigid about actually carrying out the planned structure of each scene; rather, they increasingly tried to allow the audience intervention to dictate where the scene would lead. As a result, each scenario or "game" became longer and longer in its playing and they found they were completing fewer and fewer of the scenarios with each performance. Finally, at a particular evening performance in Lethbridge--they were in the midst of presenting the "getting fired" scenario--the cast just let the participation go to the point where a majority of the audience ended up on stage and the scene evolved into a total participational simulation similar those of The Black Creek Project and Project Immigration. As Jane Heather remembers,

> In that particular scene I was referee, Tony was mentally handicapped, Frank Pellegrino was the boss, and Shelly (Irvine) was off. The scene was very simple: the guy goes in and he's going to be fired because he can't read. There's a message on one of the machines that says not to put your hand in there when the thing is coming down, and because he can't read, he's going to get fired. So the boss calls Tony in and tells him this, and Tony leaps across the table and grabs him and starts beating him up.

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[30] Selman, discussion with Hall & Heather, August 1988.

> And the referee stops the game and asks the audience for advice. In this situation there was lots of advice for Tony about controlling his temper and we said well he can't control his temper. Finally someone suggested that he get a friend to go with him. So I asked if someone could be his friend and go with him. So they both went to see the boss and tried to explain the situation. But he still got fired because Frank was saying things like: "What, you're his friend? Get out of here!" So I said, "Well what are they going to dc now?" And they decided that more and more friends should go with Tony to see the boss. So we had all these people on the stage. It sort of broke loose. I was running around saying "What can all these people do?" And they decided that they would all as a group go to the boss and say that if he didn't keep Tony on in his job, they were going to all quit because they were now all working there. It ended by Tony getting his job back. I don't remember where the word "Strike!" came from, but I think it was probably me. They picked it up and they were on strike and they weren't going to go back to work until Tony got his job back. I can't remember whether we resolved the reading question or not. But I do remember having this vision of being out in the audience and Tony was up there with about ten or fifteen people, standing around discussing about how you had to go and talk with the boss again, while I was running around the audience asking people for advice.[31]

A significant thing about that particular performance was that it was played in the actual workplace of the audience members. As a result, the audience personalized the whole thing (the events within the scene) as if it was actually happening there at that time. They were completely willing to suspend any disbelief that they might have had and allow themselves to pretend that the situation was really happening. Jan Selman points out that, as an audience, the mentally handicapped were always extremely willing to believe totally in what was happening on the stage.

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[31] Jane Heather, panel discussion with Jan Selman and Tony Hall, 3 August, 1988.

> That audience is more willing than most audiences to just totally believe in what you've set up. All you've got are these three chairs; this guy in this ridiculous referee's outfit with a whistle; and these actors who, just the moment before, were playing different characters. And the belief level is incredible.[32]

That incredible level of belief acted as a catalyst to push the cast further into exploring the unique possibilities of "participation" as a theatrical form. As Jane Heather outlined in her description of the show in Lethbridge, there came a point where there were a lot of people on stage; where the initial scene had broken off into a multiplicity of mini scenes, each happening around one of the actors from the initial scene.

The scene that set out initially with some well defined controls and break-off points for the audience intervention, now has exploded into "total participation". For someone out in the audience, it would appear that the show has totally broken down; that there is nothing but chaos on the stage. "That's because," according to Jan Selman, "there's no longer a show to watch. It's like Project Immigration; you can't go and watch that show."[33]

It is not surprising that, with this show, very little was being written down. How do you write "participation" down? How do you prepare the actors for the kind of eruption--along with all the theatrical possibilities that can accompany such an eruption--that occurred during this particular performance in Lethbridge?

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[32] Selman, discussion with Hall & Heather, August, 1988.

[33] Ibid.

Because each of the scenes contained only a bare minimum number of lines--in effect, each scene was a mere skeletal framework to spark and initiate the participation--there was little that the cast could rehearse in the traditional sense. The cast put a great deal of time and effort into establishing the "rules of the game"; how the audience intervention would take place. There was also some time set aside for thinking through and practising possible audience interventions.

> I remember rehearsals that were about building to a good stopping place and then practising every possible answer and then how to get back on track. A lot of energy went into getting back on track. And that was before we knew how to teach anything about participation. Some actors could do it, but others can't. The show really couldn't go much further until we learned how to do it.[34]

This is not to say that it is impossible to rehearse the participational aspects of a production. Indeed, Selman maintains that a great deal of time needs to be devoted to practising participation. In shows such as the ones that have been discussed, where so much depends on the participation, it is extremely important that the actors have a solid understanding of the process and the techniques that are necessary for them to keep the show moving in a positive direction.

> You think that you can't do it without an audience, but there are lots of ways to do it. The simplest is "we're all the audience and you're the character so go for it"; or "we're now the audience but we don't want to talk"; or "we're now the audience but we're rowdy"; "we're now the

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[34] Ibid.

> audience and one of us doesn't want to get involved"; "we're now the audience and one of us wants to dominate everything". This kind of thing is really basic to all participational rehearsals, but they need to be discovered before you can rehearse them.[35]

To work in the participational forms of theatre, you require people with very special skills who are committed to what they do. A very big problem for Catalyst is the fact that, in the general pool of actors, there simply aren't very many who possess those skills. Professional training in the theatre doesn't lead people in that direction. Both Selman and current Artistic Director, Ruth Smillie, have felt the need for Catalyst to train actors in the participational forms of theatre. As Smillie recalls,

> It became very clear to me--in my first year here--that we have to train people ourselves. Otherwise it won't happen. So we've implemented a lot of things in terms of rehearsals. We are now separating participational training out of the rehearsal process. It's usually taking place in advance of the actual rehearsal time. What we found is that if you put it into the actual rehearsal process, you get all balled up with: how much of this is character analysis?; how much of this is skill development? So we're separating it now. We're saying that you need the skills first--we'll do that separately--and then you can start rehearsals.[36]

Like Smillie, Selman sees the need to separate the teaching of participational skills from the actual rehearsal of a particular show. Just like an actor needs to take a voice class away from rehearsal, according to Selman, you need to teach the participational techniques away from the pressure of trying to make the show work.

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[35] Selman, interview, August 1987.

[36] Ruth Smillie, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

> You start with what are the skills and then you add in the content and the circumstances of that particular play. Because if you put them together--and that's how we did it at first, because we were discovering these things as we went--sometimes you lose sight of what all the techniques are that you have available to you. So ideally you teach the skills--the basic skills of starting participation; of including audience members; of generating wider discussion; challenging assumptions in the audience; of moving out and allowing the audience to talk to itself, and then moving back in to push forward; of audience management--and then you weave in the actual structure of the show.[37]

In addition to the participational skills that each actor needs to possess or be taught, Selman points out that you need to devote rehearsal time to building in "safety nets". As she puts it,

> ...the worst thing to see--the thing that kills discussion and kills atmosphere faster than anything else--is having an actor in a participatory form where they are terrified and they feel unsafe and therefore communicate that to the audience.[38]

Building in "backup positions" is a necessary stage in the rehearsal process. The need for these backup positions has to be dealt with positively. The cast needs to anticipate the possibility not every participational technique will work for every audience. What may work with one audience on one occasion, may receive absolutely no response from another audience. The cast needs to realize it doesn't matter if a certain technique isn't working at a certain point, because in a minute or so it very well may work.

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[37] Selman, interview, August, 1987.

[38] Ibid.

> People need to be quiet sometimes for a moment and consider something; people sometimes need to be asked a second time in a different way. That's not a failure, it's just a percolation time.[39]

According to Selman, the best participational actors have, what she calls, "split brains". They can readily integrate their character's objectives with what they, as the actor, know to be the teaching objectives of the show. They are able to take an audience suggestion in a certain direction because that's what their character would do, while, at the same time, they are well aware that their objective as the teacher lies in a different direction; instinctively they seem to know how they are going to get from the one to the other.

Ruth Smillie recalls an example where an actress (Michelle Muzzi) had tremendous success in exploring the participational potential in the 1987 Catalyst show, Zeke and the Indoor Plants:

> Michelle Muzzi discovered a whole new meaning for the word 'yes'. The kids wanted to say something so they could watch her go: "Oh, that is amazing! What is your name?" She had those kids doing things that dumbfounded their teachers. The other actors--with her example and her willingness to go that far--went that far with her.[40]

Selman understands that for the huge majority of actors, their background and training is in understanding "character" and "character objectives". In her directing of participation she has learned to capitalize on that fact and attempts, in rehearsal, to align the character objectives with the teaching objectives. So, while some time is spent in teaching and working participational techniques, other time is set aside for discovering and thoroughly working through character objectives. Through this process the actor is brought to an understanding that their character may be at some point of crisis in their life--may be faced with a major decision--and is in need of help or advice. What is crucial is that the actor realizes that his or her character needs the audience; respects and wants the help and advice that the audience can provide. This is extremely important in participatory theatre. The audience has to feel needed, in some way, in order for them to bother to participate.

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Smillie, interview, February, 1988.

> The closer you can ally the teacher part of the participatory actor to the character part, the more successful it is on the whole. And that goes back to rehearsal process because it's a kind of research that asks: Who is my audience? Who really are they? What turns them on? What will make them talk? What do they care about? Are they an audience or population group that wants to be asked: "Please help"; or are they wanting us to say "Cool off!"? Will you start talking because I say that or make you mad? Or will you start talking because I need you? Or will you engage because you laugh first? Or will you engage because first, you had to try just a little bit and it was O.K., so now you'll try a lot? That is very much a director's research but it's also very much an actor's research. Because, just as you can re-interpret a role, you can reinterpret your "way in" for participation. Your choices have to come from the audience; they don't, any more, come from a script.[41]

The fact that the cast of Stand Up For Your Rights allowed the audience to make integral choices regarding what certain characters should do and where the scene should go is central to the success of this participational project. As has been illustrated, there were nights where the cast allowed the structure of the show to break down completely in favour of taking the audience intervention to its fullest potential. Through it all, the actors (and the company as a whole) were learning valuable lessons about how participation can work; already, ideas were being conceptualized and formulated for possible future participational projects.

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[41] Selman, interview, August, 1987.

In terms of "Theatre With", the fact that Catalyst Theatre did not simply try to reproduce "carbon copy" versions of other participational formats and shows--rather developing their own original material and experimenting with structural forms that were based in large part on the subject matter of the show and the audience for whom it was intended--is paramount in the successful evolution of this theatrical form for this company. Through careful evaluation of what worked and what didn't, they were able to develop a systematic approach to developing participational projects. As well, they were able to develop valuable participational tools and techniques for actors; tools to help them understand and to actively facilitate the participational process in practice.

Stand Up For Your Rights taught the company valuable lessons about the importance of understanding and appreciating the population for whom a show is intended. Insights like these have enriched and strengthened the work that Catalyst has done in its "presentational" projects as well. This strong affinity with the audience has given all of Catalyst Theatre's work an immediacy and focus one does not often find in the more traditional--middle of the road--theatrical work of today. It is a hallmark of this company and is certainly key to the success that Catalyst Theatre has realized over the years.

Stand Up For Your Rights was a useful and effective vehicle which allowed Catalyst Theatre the opportunity to explore and develop this participational theatre form. Because of the special attributes of the population for whom the show was intended--most significantly their ability to totally believe in what was happening on the stage--the cast was able to push the form to levels of participation exceeding everyone's expectations. It is true most of the experimentation and development of the theatrical form was happening in performance, nevertheless, valuable lessons were being learned and evaluated. Everyone involved in that production came away with a clearer understanding of how participation can work, and an appreciation for the numerous possibilities of this theatrical form. There were obviously some techniques that worked better than others, but by assessing and studying the various successes and failures, the groundwork was being laid for future ventures into participational theatre. Techniques and rules were being established that could be written down and indeed even rehearsed prior to taking a participational theatre piece into production. Entire productions could be designed based on the theories and practices that were discovered in this show. In retrospect, Jan Selman reflects,

> What we find out, as we learn more and more about participation and about the job of the actor as animator, is that you have a lot of control and you can write a lot of it down; not as a script but as a "what happens" and "what might happen" and "if this happens what should happen". You can write the emotional stages of participation down.[42]

Making these types of discoveries and progressively attempting to write the process down is something Catalyst has become quite good at. Catalyst Theatre has continued to be at the forefront of participational theatre work in Canada. It could even be argued that Catalyst is indirectly responsible for the advent of much of the participational theatre in this country. It is true that Catalyst has been quite innovative in the development of this form; a leader not only in this country, but worldwide.

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[42] Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

THEATRE "BY"

> In Theatre By, you are giving people the skills to do the plays. It's important to stress that, in the case of Theatre By, you're not talking about training in the same sense that you are with professional actors. My experience is that when people tell their own stories, there is no acting required.[1]

Theatre By is essentially just that: theatre created and performed by the people who are themselves the subject of the performance; people telling their own stories. Rather than hiring a group of professional actors to come in and research a particular community--actors who in turn create and mount a production focusing on that community and their specific needs--certain members of the community are themselves given the tools and techniques necessary to "tell their own story" through the form of a theatrical production.

As was acknowledged in the previous chapters, Catalyst Theatre has been highly successful in its creation of theatre for special populations, mainly because of its close connection to the selected community. By establishing and maintaining those ties from the time they decide to focus on that community to long after they have mounted any type of performance within the community, Catalyst's theatre has a had a special and powerful authenticity to it. Catalyst could never create their shows in isolation. They need to be thoroughly fed and influenced by the community in order to mount effective theatre: theatre that effects education and change. Catalyst needs the community as much as the community needs Catalyst. While the community holds the key to what the content of any theatrical production needs to be, Catalyst has the knowledge and expertise with regard to applying the theatrical techniques and methods to that content.

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[1] Ruth Smillie, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

Since, within the type of work that Catalyst does, the real educational value comes as much from the process of creating the play as it does from seeing it in performance, it would follow that, if theatre is really to make an impact on a chosen community, then that community needs to be fully involved in the process. Their involvement needs to go beyond simply informing the actors and then, possibly, witnessing and involving themselves as audience members in the end product (the performance). By giving them the tools to create and perform their own theatre and thereby tell their own story, popular theatre companies, such as Catalyst, could really unleash a whole wealth of educational potential. Theoretically, it makes perfect sense, and the process sounds amazingly simple.

Catalyst, under the mantle of theatre that effects education and change, has always endeavoured to create good theatre. Certainly, the content and overall message of their various projects and shows is of the utmost importance, but that message has to be communicated through solid and sound theatre. The strength and power of good theatre to move and engage an audience--to challenge them to action and change--is ultimately what gives the message its potency.

One can undoubtedly cite examples of community generated theatre that do not strive for quality and do not require acute levels of skill and training. In describing some of these examples, David Barnet, writes:

> An alternate approach to popular theatre, which has been influenced by adult and development education, stresses the overt communication of specific information and concepts. Its theatre techniques are often deliberately elementary, with a simple acting style close to role play, and a straightforward dramatic structure with a minimum of dramatic tension or complex scenes. Its objective is to illustrate or demonstrate certain points, and although an audience for whom the material is immediately relevant might become emotionally involved, the process is primarily intellectual. This approach requires little theatre experience, and once the process is understood can be practised by groups anywhere.[2]

This is not the type of theatre that Catalyst is attempting to facilitate in its use of Theatre By. The skills needed to create the type of theatre for which Catalyst is renowned cannot be taught over the course of a weekend workshop.

As one traces the development of Catalyst Theatre--from its early "documentary based" collectives, through its innovative and precursory work in participational theatre, and beyond--there surfaces a certain evolution in their programming. In the last few years that Jan Selman was Artistic Director, the company deliberately moved away from doing shows intended for a general public because, as Selman says,

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[2] David Barnet, "Out of the Collectives," Canadian Theatre Review 53 (Winter 1987) :5-6.

> ...we needed to spend more time looking much more in depth at social action and how we really promote change. And where we came to was a commitment to longer term projects--more developmental projects--working with groups, not only putting things at groups. Our early thinking said that we had to do participational theatre because that increases people's involvement. Then we came to the notion that we had to do more developmental work; moving to the idea that we had to work on many fronts at the same time. We can do a general public show about prisons while at the same time working in prisons on another show. We had a phase concept going that didn't rule out general public shows but said that, out of the blue, a general public show on some issue that we don't touch in any other way does not make sense if we're serious about our mandate. If we're not serious, we can do anything we want. That's not to say that we have anything against theatres that are doing socially responsible general public shows, we just really need to put our focus somewhere else. ...I believe that there is a place for noisy rowdy social action theatre that is not being filled in this community. I think that's important. But it should not be done if it at all jeopardizes some of the work that is in fact more effective and more important--work with groups that need it now; that have a chance to make changes for themselves.[3]

Selman, along with many who were working with Catalyst Theatre at this time, came to the point of view that, in terms of their mandate of theatre for education and change, the real and most important change happens by people who are in the situation themselves. And so the company began to spend less time with the professionals at social agencies, and more time with the people whom those professionals were serving. They felt that they could accomplish far more by spending time with a group of natives on a reserve than by providing the after-dinner entertainment at a conference on unemployment.

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[3] Jan Selman, personal interview, 25 November, 1985.

A significant project in the evolution of Catalyst's emerging role of facilitating theatre "by" the community, rather than providing theatre "for" the community or even "with" the community, is a little known venture called Neighbours on Stage (1980). The project is important in that it marks the beginning of a new relationship or way of working between Catalyst and the community. Here Catalyst was working along side a grassroots organization called the Alberta Avenue Need Association. Their focus was on a low-income neighbourhood that included a lot of ethnic groups. The Association wanted Catalyst to help them to use theatre as a means of bringing people together to celebrate their community and, at the same time, to articulate some of the concerns of the community. The intention was to get the people of the community involved in creating, producing, and performing in their own play. By teaching some theatre skills and techniques to various groups of individuals within the community, the Catalyst actors hoped to provide a spark that would initiate the process and thereby help the community come together to collaborate on this great big neighbourhood production. As Denise Roy recalls,

> What the actors did was they went and worked with a variety of groups in the community. For example, they went in--and as part of a regular meeting of a "single mom's" group--they conducted a mini Popular Theatre workshop. Believe me, we were not very sophisticated in those days; God knows what they did really. The intent was to get people participating, and then the final show was to be the scenes and the bits that all of these groups had made about their community. And, of course, most of these bits and things that the groups were sup-

> posed to have made didn't get made because the groups fell apart or were unwilling. So, in fact, there was very little actual community group involvement in the final show. The actors ended up making a bunch of scenes and just dying on stage. But it was quite an interesting concept. It was one of the first where we were really trying to work in partnership with a grassroots community group; to use the theatre to serve their needs.[4]

Undaunted by the relative failure of this particular production, Catalyst continued to explore the possibilities of providing the actual community with the necessary tools to tell their own story through the means of theatre. Their most successful work in this area has usually involved some kind of "phased in" community involvement. Any kind of performance that issues directly out of the community--in that it is both created and performed by the people within that community--is usually the result of a long term commitment by Catalyst to that particular community and their needs. It's a commitment that could very well span several years.

The process could begin by simply bringing an existing Catalyst production into the targeted community; a production that, of course, bears some relevance to the people within that community. Through this exposure, the community is somewhat familiarized to the type of work that Catalyst does and has likely gotten to know some of the people who are involved in the creative workings of the theatre company.

The next level of involvement could include sending a group of Catalyst actor/creators into the community to research and develop material, the intended result being the creation of a show or event tailored to the specific needs of this community. Now, not only has the company built up a relationship of trust within the community, but the community, in turn, has been empowered to a certain degree, simply by virtue of the fact that they now realize their story is important--so important, in fact, that a theatre company has seen fit to come in and create a play about it. Likewise, they recognize the power of theatre--specifically, the tools and techniques of the kind of theatre that Catalyst does--for addressing things that they, as a community, need to address.

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[4] Denise Roy, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

The way is now open to begin the process of "working with" the community to develop and create their own play. The ideal situation would be to have the community itself make the request: to ask Catalyst to provide them with the necessary skills and techniques, and to guide them through the process of telling their own story through theatre. As Jan Selman says, the type of theatre that Catalyst practises, by definition, "starts from a community need, the theatre being a response to the need for change."[5]

This phase alone, in the process, may take several years. But, as part of Catalyst's long-term commitment to a project, the intent is not so much to have them create a play, perform it, and be done with it, rather, it is to provide them with the skills and the courage to continue to use theatre as a vital and potent way to address the needs of their community long after the outside facilitators have gone.

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[5] Jan Selman, "Three Cultures, One Issue," Canadian Theatre Review 53 (Winter 1987) :11.

In Catalyst's work with the natives in the Wabasca/Desmarais area, the whole process began in the fall of 1983 when Talk is Cheap, a participational revue dealing with the topic of parent/teen communication, was brought into the community. In the winter of 1984, Jane Heather--one of the collaborators on Talk is Cheap, and who had toured with the 1983 production--returned, along with four other theatre artists, to the remote community to begin a process of "working with" select members of that community. They were identifying issues within the community and attempting to provide the necessary skills and guidance so that those issues could be addressed, by these community members, through the means of theatre. Heather again visited the community a year later and remained there from March through August, working primarily with young people in the area. Together they created a drama that was performed for the community, in the community. In June of 1986, Heather once more returned to the area to facilitate the creation and development of the production Journey of Choices, Feathers of Hope, which was performed within the community and at the 1986 Edmonton Fringe Festival. This production had a total of six performances and played to an estimated audience of five hundred people.

Doing this type of theatre effectively, involves not only a long-term commitment, but a skilled and committed outside animator to facilitate the process. Every community or group is unique and thereby presents a distinct challenge for the animator. There are times when that person needs to gently coax and uplift the group members in an attempt to get them opening up and expressing themselves. There are other times when the animator needs to irritate and challenge the group, to make them feel uncomfortable to the point that they eventually explode beyond their latent tendency to present material that is safe and emotionally uninteresting. According to Jan Selman,

> Some groups are experts at telling stories. In that case you are literally there to work with them on theatre skills so they can tell their stories in a different way. But you're also there to help them make meaning of their stories. So the story goes up to the point where "I had this vision that my grandmother was going to die, and I told my parents and no one would believe me, and she did die and I was mad at them and I'm still mad at them." So that's the story and they can tell it beautifully and they can even act it out quite beautifully. Now, what meaning do you make of that story? Does that story stay with you because you want reconciliation; or is it that you don't want reconciliation? Did you learn anything from that happening? Do you have anything to say to anybody else by telling that story? And that is where, in that case, you become the irritant. You want them to burst beyond their story. This flopping down and telling their story; or telling that story but then wrapping it up and making it kind of nice or successful at the end, I would say does more harm than good. They have an inclination to tell stories that justify who they are and why they would like to stay that way and why they will stay that way. ...It's that irritation that inevitably leads to various forms of anger or however it's expressed in the process. How many times have you changed without there being a stage where there is some rage in there?

I don't think I ever have.[6]

The other side of this is where the core group in a community tells the appropriate story, makes some meaning out of it and consequently chooses to have the story work, within the context of a theatrical event, as a challenge to its wider community. But the very real and substantiated fear is that the community will react negatively. So even if the group takes that huge, amazing step of going beyond the boundaries of what is safe and what is accepted in the community, the anticipated community reaction to that message has to be addressed. It has to be understood that quite often this type of thing can be extremely risky for the performers. For the outside animator, this presents another responsibility sometimes overlooked in a typical Theatre By situation.

Selman has worked as an outside animator on a number of community based popular theatre projects; projects designed to facilitate the creation and development of theatre emerging directly from the target community on issues that are of concern to the community. In 1986, in response to a study reporting an extremely high incidence of family violence in most northern communities, the Department of Culture and Communications of the Northwest Territories initiated a theatre-based program designed to increase public awareness of the problem and to provide a focus for community discussion and action. Catalyst Theatre assisted in the program development and Selman's services were offered to two isolated communities that had each been given funds to produce and tour an original dramatic work on the issue of spousal assault. Her experiences working in these two northern communities gives credence to the suggested requirement that outside animators must approach each situation in a unique way as they undertake to find the right process for community development through theatre.

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[6] Jan Selman, panel discussion with Tony Hall & Jane Heather, 3 August, 1988.

As the outside animator, her work in these two communities was particularly challenging in that she had to overcome language and cultural barriers. The one community, Pond Inlet, already had an established theatre company which had, prior to Selman's arrival, been working on drafts for two one act plays on the issue. Her task was to work with the theatre company to further develop and complete the scripts, then, as the director, to rehearse and present fully staged productions of the two plays.

In developing the plays, she found the largest hurdle was the topic itself.

> There was a tradition, based on cultural norms and circumstances, of men wielding the decision-making power in the group. There was also a strong desire to tell stories with "happy endings"--which did not include a couple separating or a woman leaving to escape violence.[7]

She had to challenge the group to go beyond what was considered safe or what would be most easily accepted by the community. With the tension sparked through a contractual demand specifying that the victims of assault could not be blamed for being beaten--a tension that was fuelled by Selman's insistence that they avoid the easy answers--issues were eventually explored and presented in their full complexity. According to Selman, "A wide variety of character, experiences and viewpoints emerged from the process."[8]

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[7] Selman, CTR 53 (Winter 1987) :12.

While Pond Inlet presented certain complications for an outside animator, the Dene community of Fort Franklin introduced an even bigger challenge for Selman. Here, she had to start from scratch. She not only had to recruit a theatre group to create and perform the play, she had to introduce the whole notion of theatre to the community: what it is and what it can conceivably do. In discussing her work within this distinct culture, she writes,

> There are no words for "drama," "actor," or "theatre" in Slavey. The closest description we found was "like the Christmas concert at the school."[9]

Overcoming such enormous obstacles, Selman managed to not only introduce the notion of theatre as a means to address a specific community issue but she managed, in her initial three week visit, to provide enough tools and techniques to get the community started on the process of creating their own play.

When Selman returned to Fort Franklin, four months later, she found that a theatre group had been assembled, and a script had been created. She found that here, in contrast to the situation in Pond Inlet, her most important function as the outside animator was to be positive and encouraging. As Selman recalls,

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[8] Ibid., p. 13.

[9] Ibid., p. 15.

> We rehearsed and produced From the Heart in one week. We had to move that fast or it would never have happened. The group was sure they could not do it and they were running out of staying power. In this case an optimistic outsider had a positive role to play. They agreed to perform. They were terrified that people would not come, terrified that people would come. And they were terrified that people would hate them for what they were trying to do. Spousal assault is not a public subject. The night of the performance I gained new insight into the meaning of courage.[10]

Selman goes on to describe a moment in the performance that, by professional theatre standards, would be looked upon with a great deal of criticism; a moment that would be considered to represent an inexcusable weakness on the part of the performer involved. This instance is significant in that, through Selman's astute analysis of what happened, a vital and important difference between Theatre For and Theatre By emerges. Her written recollection of the moment is as follows:

> Two minutes into the performance an actress froze. For a very long time. It was stage fright, but it was much more. She was literally overwhelmed, overcome with emotion. She had seen the audience arrive and had spoken with many before the performance. However, standing in the playing area, facing everyone, she realized that all these people from her community had come to see her; her effort was recognized. She suddenly faced the enormity of her accomplishment, and also the risk. A director could not plan a more complete theatrical moment. The entire audience realized, with her, just what this effort was about. She started, she cried, she hid, she went on. Everyone was with her. Everyone understood how important

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[10] Ibid., p. 18.

> this event was to the entire community. They put all their energy into helping her and the entire event succeed; everyone suddenly had a stake in this community-owned action.[11]

Out of this amazing example emerges two crucial distinctions separating theatre put on by an outside group from theatre emerging out of the community. Firstly, it is far more difficult to perform in front of your own community than it is to perform to relative strangers. The degree of risk is certainly much higher for someone who must continue to live and work in the community than it is for someone who can simply excuse themselves after the performance and return to the comfort of their own environs. Secondly, the degree of involvement and identification on the part of the audience is much higher when the message is being spoken by individuals from their own community. In this example, rather than jeering or laughing at the individual who was in trouble on the stage, they instead sent out their compassion and encouragement, and, in so doing, totally involved themselves in the event, participating in a very personal way in what was being spoken and enacted on the stage.

Though the challenge can be enormous and the risk factor sometimes seemingly overwhelming, in terms of the potential long-lasting value to a community, Theatre By represents an extremely powerful approach to community development. Catalyst's work in this area is as singular and as exploratory in its development as was their initial work in the area of participational theatre.

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[11] Ibid.

In the spring of 1987, Catalyst initiated a Theatre By project entitled: The Working Theatre Project. The show was to mirror the lives and struggles of unemployed people and carried the stipulation that it was to be created, developed, and performed by people who themselves were unemployed. Catalyst received funding for their proposal from Canada Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) who funded the project under the Innovations Program of the Canadian Jobs Strategy. As Denise Roy recalls:

> ...we had gotten the money based on the argument that--for people who are long term unemployed--one of the difficulties is that they don't look for work and they don't get work because there is a process by which your self-esteem gets lower and lower and lower; and you get immobilized. So you stick there; nothing happens. We were confident that by getting people involved with creating a play through a kind of group process where you're sharing your story with other people and your own experiences are validated, that this would work to improve their self-esteem.[12]

The seven individuals who were chosen to work on this project all had one thing in common: they were all unemployed at the time that they were hired. They were all single, although three of the seven were single parents. Their relative homogeneity pretty much stops right there, however. Their ages ranged from early twenties to late forties, their education from grade seven right through to university and college degrees. Their previous employment credits included everything from waitressing to working in community outreach. Even their experiences in being unemployed varied greatly: from one who had been without a job for close to seven years to another who viewed unemployment as a "paid sabbatical" from the labour force. As Ruth Smillie, the outside animator on the project, recalls,

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[12] Roy, interview, February, 1988.

> In the Working Theatre we had a very diverse group: we had militant feminists; a guy that wants a sex change operation; a macho Indian guy. There was no consensus on anything except that through collective action and support was where it was at. They had experienced that first hand.[13]

It is significant, in terms of differences between the participants in the project, to examine the various reasons that each of them had for deciding to get involved. Most would readily acknowledge that a prime motivational factor for them was the money. As one participant wrote in evaluation of the project,

> When I found out I got accepted, it felt like I had just won the lottery. It was unbelievable. It's better than any grants I've ever been on. I couldn't believe that I'd been so lucky considering the number of applications who had been interviewed. It felt like I had won the lottery. It also felt very ironical because at the time when Ruth called me initially to let me know she'd like to interview me, I had been sitting there looking at my resume for an hour and just pulling my hair out thinking what can I exaggerate, or what things can I fabricate in here, and what things could I say in my resume, so that it will appear that some of my experience is much more extensive than what it is. And I was just pulling my hair out thinking I don't have enough experience in anything. And Ruth called and introduced herself and said what she was doing, she said that I'd been recommended because I'd had a lot of experience being un-

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[13] Smillie, interview, February, 1988.

> employed![14]

Aside from the money, some entered into the project for personal therapy; others because they relished the chance to make a statement about unemployment.

> I was glad to hear that somebody was taking an interest in the fact that there just isn't any work. I was interested in being part of a group that was going to show people that it is bad out there. I also thought that it would help boost my morale and give me more confidence too.[15]

Boosting the morales of the participants and instilling them with increased confidence was a primary focus of the project from Catalyst's point of view. As the outside animator, Smillie knew that the participants, in addition to acquiring theatrical skills, would require a lot of support on the personal level. The usual approach that she takes in Theatre By situations is to first focus on addressing the individual personal needs of participants. In her words,

> The primary focus is always on getting--what I call--a strong circle, where people feel a strong sense of support and trust and can honestly feel that whatever they bring to that circle will be accepted, respected and affirmed by the group. And that really means everything. That really means stories about giving your baby up; that really does mean that. Always the objective is--through that creation of a strong circle--to develop the self-confidence and self-esteem of the participants. Generally speaking, with people who are not part of the dominant culture, that is a real issue: whether they are unemployed or Indian or a woman or a single parent.[16]

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[14] An Evaluation of the Working Theatre Pilot Project, prepared by Henry Dembicki, Edmonton Social Planning Council, (October 1987) p. 18.

[15] Ibid., p. 19.

[16] Smillie, interview, February, 1988.

The "circle" represents a procedural method Smillie gained from her experiences in working with native children in Saskatchewan. She, together with colleague, Kelly Murphy, initially developed the process as a method for employing the techniques of storytelling and collective creation with urban native teenagers. The "strong circle", both factually and symbolically, creates an environment where it is "safe" and acceptable to expose yourself through story, to reveal your innermost fears and feelings. The "circle" is at the core of the storytelling process. It is based on traditional native storytelling forms and the understanding that a strong group can only be achieved if each member is part of the "circle".

Each workshop session begins and ends with a "circle". At the beginning of the workshop day, the group sits on the floor in a circle. Each person is welcomed, announcements are made, and there is opportunity given for the expression of individual needs and concerns which can, in turn, be addressed by the group as a whole. At the end of the workshop day, the group again comes together--this time to review the work that was done over the course of the day; make plans to contact any absentee members; and to again address individual concerns and needs.

In developing the process, Smillie has tried not to divorce the "circle" from its roots in native culture. With Smillie, there always exists a strong element of ritual in the building of a "circle" of people, and in the telling and creating of stories within that circle. In addition, cooperative games and exercises in storytelling are used to help build the "circle". It is essential to create a non-threatening environment, an environment where everyone feels completely comfortable. Cooperation and trust are stressed as skills that must be developed and practised within the group, the overall objective being that of establishing and maintaining a "strong circle".

Although the exercise is usually not introduced until it is felt that the group can truly support each person in the sharing of their stories, the "Medicine Bag" exercise stands as central in the application of the strong circle process. It is based on the understanding that physical objects are powerful connectors to emotions and memories.

To begin the exercise, a bag full of miscellaneous objects is emptied into the centre of the circle. The various objects--which can include things like children's toys, articles of clothing, containers of food, cooking and eating utensils, jewellery, make-up, tools, appliances, etc.--are spread out so that each person can clearly see every object. The members of the group are each asked to select an object that reminds them of a significant event, special memory, or person in their life. Finally, moving around the circle one at a time, each person tells the story of the event, the memory, or the person of which the object he or she is holding reminds them. An extension to the exercise often involves the attempt to link the stories together in some way, through similarities in situation, location, and family relationships, to name but a few.

As the stories within the group become deeper and more personal, it is important to reinforce the importance of each and every member to the "circle". For some, this can be a unique experience. Ruth Smillie recalls an instance from the Working Theatre Project that illustrates this truth:

> This one guy--the guy who had lived on the streets and had had a terrible life--one day as we were going around the circle, with tears in his eyes said that he couldn't believe that he had this job. I asked what he meant by that and he said "Well, I'm being treated like a human being." Isn't it sad that that can be a unique experience for a lot of people.[17]

The "circle" is intended to uplift and acclaim every individual within it.

An effective application for doing this is the "Spirit Circle" or "Animal Circle" exercise. The exercise begins with the leader providing some necessary background to the idea of the Spirit Circle. It is explained that in Native culture it is believed we are each given an "animal spirit" that influences us, watches over us, and protects us. It is the object of the circle to identify the many positive qualities of each individual in the circle, determine the appropriate "spirit animal" for that person, and then give them the gift of that "spirit animal".

The procedure begins by selecting one individual with whom they can start. Everyone gets a chance to tell that person and the group what he or she feels are that individual's particular strengths and unique qualities. After the group has had ample opportunity to express what they feel about the individual, they are asked to choose an appropriate animal for this person. There is bound to be some debate as to which animal is the most fitting, but the group must come to some consensus--everyone must feel that the animal that is selected is the "right" one. On occasion, a person may be given more than one animal.

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[17] Ibid.

This process is repeated until everyone in the circle has been given an "animal spirit"; at which point the entire group stands together, and each person, in turn, states the name of his or her animal.

In The Working Theatre Project, as has been mentioned, the "circle" was at the core of the workshop process. The establishment of a "strong circle" was seen as critical to the building of improved self-esteem amongst the participants. In addition, it was intended to develop the groups' collective storytelling skills and serve as a springboard into establishing overall theatrical skills. It proved to be an extremely valuable means of opening people up, building group solidarity, and allowing individuals the opportunity to share openly from their lives and experiences. As one participant recalls,

> As the circle was going around...I found these people being very honest. They had nothing to be ashamed of because we were all in the same boat. So it got to my turn and I just told them the truth. It more or less

broke the ice.[18]

As one of the outside animators in this project, Ruth Smillie placed a lot of emphasis on group building. She also stressed, very strongly, the importance of research. Once a "strong circle" had been established with the project participants, Smillie introduced the notion that their circle was larger than the circle they were sitting in at that moment. Their circle had to be seen as encompassing all the unemployed people in their society. Similarly, their circle had to attempt to address the needs and concerns of all of those people on the outside in the same way it had served to address and answer those of the individuals within the circle. Eventually, they wanted more stories--other people's stories--in that circle, so they went out and got them.

It is significant to note that the kind of research here being done by the participants, is very similar to the research process employed on most Catalyst shows. Rather than bringing a lot of statistical information to rehearsals--information that is extremely difficult to transfer into theatre--participants are contributing people's stories; attempting to retell those stories as honestly and as accurately as they can. The difference is that, in this case, they are telling the stories of individuals whose experiences are not unlike their own; individuals who have a shared commonality in the fact that either they are unemployed or they work in some capacity with unemployed people. Rather than venturing into a subject matter and population unfamiliar to them, they instead seek to affirm their own experiences and feelings by interviewing people who are a great deal like themselves. In talking about the process, Ruth Smillie states,

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[18] Evaluation of Working Theatre..., p. 22.

> Usually what people do in that kind of situation is share their own stories first. They are coming from a particular background. Two of the guys had had a lot of experience with a men's hostel. What they wanted to find out was the perspective of the social worker and the guys that run the hostel. They talked to guys on the street to get more of a perspective, but they were playing people they knew; they were playing people like themselves.[19]

The fact they were playing people like themselves--people whose experiences were not unlike their own--aided in providing the crucial element of authenticity so vital to this kind of work. It must be remembered that these people are not professional actors. They have not been instilled with the complex acting skills required to give veracity to any characterization and scenic interaction that exists outside of their background. In Theatre By, they essentially must endeavour to play within the realm of their own experience. Can what they are doing, then, be considered acting? According to Smillie,

> To me, acting is essentially doing things; it is essentially operating within the reality of a particular situation in terms of what that person would do in a situation. Although the participants called what they were doing "acting", it didn't ring true when it wasn't their own experience; it did ring true when it was. But I didn't stress the acting. It wasn't always a truthful, centred work, but the issues were from the heart and they were really important to them. The point is that they

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[19] Smillie, interview, February, 1988.

> are telling their stories; not that they are acting. The fact that they are doing it at all is amazing.[20]

It is interesting to note that when telling their own story, people never tend to be so bleak and humourless as they are when they are telling somebody else's story. Even when the story is about something that, at the time it happened, was anything but funny, people tend to infuse into it an element of reflective humour. Smillie recalls a story told by a woman in the Working Theatre Project. In the story the woman described what, to her, was the worst day of her life:

> ...She was nine months pregnant, her husband had left her, and she was on her way to the welfare office to try and appeal the fact that they were cutting off her welfare. She wrapped her car around a phone booth. There was actually someone in the phone booth when her car went out of control. She had her kid in the car and she nearly killed her kid, herself, and this person in the phone booth. She started off the story telling us about the worst day in her life. As she told the story, people were just peeing themselves. The construction of the events that occurred were so extraordinarily awful that it was funny. And when she eventually did the scene, she did it in a very humorous way; yet this was the worst day in her life.[21]

It must be stressed that the Working Theatre Project, as its name indicates, is a venture in theatre. Even though one of Catalyst's primary goals in the project was to improve the self-esteem of the individual participants involved, it was never intended to be "group therapy". On the surface, it would seem that the concept of the "circle" would encourage people to get locked into a pattern of focusing inwardly on their own problems. That tendency does exist and the animator has to be careful not to let it get out of hand. The animator has to push the participants into going further; to putting their stories into a theatrical framework. In this project, according to Smillie,

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

> ...people would come in with huge anxiety attacks and I have no time for that. I'm not interested. I'm not a social worker; I'm not a counsellor; I have no skills in that area, and I'm not prepared to deal with it on that basis. So I would say, "O.K., I'm interested in your story, but I want to see it in a scene." What we're doing here is theatre. And when you ask people to do it in theatre, they go further--they go a lot further--and it's not usually a wail; it's usually quite funny.[22]

Smillie claims that, in terms of Theatre By, there are two parts to the process. The first part is the workshop and the second part may be a performance. In her opinion, the two parts are very separate. Smillie will tell the group that they may choose not to go on with the performance. At the same time she admits that, in terms of her own agenda, she always intends to go to production because without that commitment from the outside animator, she feels, it will never happen.

In the case of the Working Theatre Project, a play (a presentational series of scenes and monologues) did eventually emerge, and the participants did take the work into production. In retrospect, participants generally felt the play accomplished a great deal in raising the audience's awareness of what it was like to be unemployed. In some instances it moved people to tears; in others it prompted people to change their attitudes. According to one audience member surveyed after a particular performance,

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[22] Ibid.

> My perception of unemployed people has changed. Having never been unemployed, I was not aware of the personal hardships one can experience. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I thought unemployed people were lazy. I can see now that the problem is much more complex, and that I'm only beginning to understand it.[23]

For the participants, however, the real value of the project lies not so much in the power of the production, but rather in the process leading up to it. As evaluated by one participant,

> It has given us self-confidence, not just assertiveness, but a deeper thing--like knowing our worth. And what was demanded of us in this project was to speak, put forth our thoughts, and that is not normally what one is asked to do, especially when being unemployed.[24]

Due to the vast amount of work Catalyst has done in the areas of Theatre For and Theatre With, people are recognizing the power of theatre for exploring an issue and communicating a message; for exposing and articulating the special needs of a distinct population. Consequently, Denise Roy has seen an increased demand in people who want to study and learn popular theatre techniques. In her words,

> People are beyond coming to us and asking for after dinner entertainment. They are beginning to understand the scope of the work that we've been doing. So they're phoning us and asking to learn the techniques; and that's

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[23] Evaluation...Working Theatre..., p. 46-47.

[24] Ibid., p.49.

> a whole shift in thinking that I think is really encouraging.[25]

Theatre By is especially effective in empowering a selected community, identifying and giving voice to their unique needs and concerns. As has been shown, the process of articulating the community's stories by means of theatre, can be extremely valuable. At the same time, there exists the potential to create powerful and effective theatre. Catalyst Theatre, for more than a decade, has been producing worthwhile theatre--engaging, moving and entertaining its audiences, while working to effect social education and change. Now, by providing skilled outside animators, Catalyst can facilitate a process by which the community can tell its own story through "catalyst" theatre, educating its audience and prompting change.

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[25] Roy, interview, February, 1988.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Today, Catalyst Theatre is active in all three of the indicated classifications or approaches for mounting productions. The form or approach each project takes is primarily dictated by the specific needs of the project's identified community or subject matter. Still, it is sometimes difficult to isolate and categorise projects into strict rules of classification. Certain projects may combine elements from the presentational "theatre for" with techniques from the participational "theatre with". Of course, if a "theatre by" undertaking goes into production, it must, out of necessity, encompass the elements and techniques of one or both of the other two approaches.

Catalyst first made its mark in the Alberta and Canadian theatre scenes due to the unique nature of the company. While other companies may have been experimenting with many of the same forms of presentation utilized by Catalyst, none were operating under the specific mandate of creating theatre exclusively for education and change. Catalyst, by nature, has never strived to be the most visible theatre company around, but they have, in their evolution, made some important theatrical advances and consequently gained a certain legitimacy in the Canadian theatre scene.

As Catalyst's work in the participational forms of theatre developed around the company's unique mandate, the company gained recognition and acknowledgement for producing some of the best "theatre for young audiences" in the country. Indeed, the experimentation and advances they have made in the area of participatory theatre has significance worldwide. This thought is echoed in the words of Denise Roy:

> I would say that some of our school touring work, for example, is on a par with any of the best work for young audiences happening anywhere. In all aspects of production, I would say we can compete with anybody.[1]

Likewise, in the area of "theatre for", the company has gained recognition not only for its success in voicing the needs and concerns of our society, but for producing good theatre as well. Some of the company's early work in the presentational forms of theatre, it can be argued, were of significance only because of the special authenticity the shows gained as a result of the actor/creator's close connection with the chosen community. As legitimate pieces of theatre--removed from the context in which they were created--these shows simply could not stand up. Still, Catalyst has always aspired to the commitment of making good theatre, and, as the company has grown and evolved, the measure of quality in their work has increased considerably. Catalyst has proven they can compete in the general public realm of theatre without sacrificing or compromising any of the ideals and goals issuing from their mandate. In fact, the strongest shows still tend to be the ones where the creators have a strong connection with the subject area and a high level of involvement with the community they are representing. As Jan Selman says,

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[1] Denise Roy, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

> ...I think back to the strongest shows and strongest successes and strongest performances, and when all of those things aligned, it was when the community kicked us around. And that's how we discovered things.[2]

Likewise, the most successful shows have involved some degree of ongoing support in the community. A theatre event, by nature, is "hit and run". A group of people are assembled to research and mount a production; when the project ends, they move on to something else. With many of the company's past projects, the follow-up support simply wasn't there. This is an area where Catalyst is not strictly a theatre company. Catalyst knows they've got to be working with organizations committed to carrying on the work, integrating their work into the work of compatible organizations that will stay with the goals of the project. According to Denise Roy,

> The way of the future is to look at what this community development and this relating to the community really means. We now have a full time community development person on staff who is trying to help us figure some of that out....In terms of really figuring out what we need to do to make sure that the theatre is utilized to its full capacity is part of something else that is going on. So it's some kind of an ongoing community development process and we're fitting in and doing what we can do best. Then somebody else, either by themselves or in partnership with us, is making sure that something carries on and happens after.[3]

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[2] Jan Selman, personal interview, 25 November, 1985.

[3] Roy, interview, February, 1988.

That level of ongoing support has naturally led Catalyst into developing the area of "theatre by": giving communities and individuals the tools, techniques and support necessary for creating their own theatre. In this regard, Catalyst has an important role to play in the area of training. This is acknowledged by Roy,

> This whole aspect of training is going to be a really big area for us in the next few years. We're becoming much more, in some ways, a consulting firm or resource centre; we are acknowledged to be the most experienced in doing a lot of things. So that the demand for us to train others, both nationally and internationally, is going to continue to grow.[4]

In terms of training, clearly the type of work practised by Catalyst requires specialized actors: actors who not only possess the unique skills required for mounting theatre that effects education and change, but who, in their outlook, are willing to commit themselves to the goals and objectives of the company and each project they undertake. Since traditional forms of actor training do not touch on the distinctive skills necessary for working in a Catalyst project, the company is committed to training actors to do the work. In the words of current artistic director, Ruth Smillie,

> I am very determined that we are going to expand this company to include a lot of artists. People don't have the training and that isn't going to change. An organization needs a really broad base of people working for it in order to be vital, so that's why the training is so very important....You have to use "theatre for education and social change" with the acting and theatre community as well....I'm looking for intelligent actors; not necessarily actors with a social conscience. By only

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[4] Ibid.

> choosing socially conscious people, maybe you're missing an opportunity for other people to be educated. Too often we write people off without considering what may have shaped those attitudes and what might change. If we believe that theatre can empower people in a "theatre by" situation, why can't it do the same thing in another sense. If we believe it does that to audiences, why can't it do that to the actors?[5]

On the job training has, since the company's inception, been part of the Catalyst tradition. The chosen community or subject area would often dictate and shape the techniques and skills that were required of actors, thus enabling them to voice the community's concerns through theatre. Likewise, through an actor/creator's strong involvement in a project's chosen community or subject area, he or she has tended to develop a special empathy for the subject area and/or community the show was attempting to represent; cultivating the social conscience of which Smillie speaks.

Through these strong connections with the chosen community, and because of the many individuals who have been willing to grow and adapt in answer to the demands of transforming the needs of those communities into dynamic and potent theatrical presentations, Catalyst has, in theory and practice, developed many unique and effective forms of theatre. Likewise, the company has consistently proven, through their extensive evaluation process, that theatre is an extremely powerful and potent way of effecting social education and change. In the words of Jan Selman,

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[5] Ruth Smillie, personal interview, 24 February, 1988.

> When a show has set out to be something for people to think about personally, in terms of personal change, it has tended to do that....Likewise, looking at social change, I think we've made big strides in understanding what social change is and how we can play a role in it. In a lot of the shows where you're not sure anything was accomplished, you feel that way because you feel like you're a "drop in the bucket", and you're such a small drop that it means nothing. On the other hand, I couldn't continue working with this kind of work if I didn't believe that every "drop in the bucket" or every human interaction added up.[6]

Since 1977, Catalyst Theatre has been using theatre to effect social education and change. In addition to the valuable and largely immeasurable contributions they have made toward the betterment of Alberta society, they have likewise established themselves on the Canadian and international theatre scenes as an innovative and important theatre company. Catalyst has been, and continues to be, a very successful theatre company.

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[6] Selman, interview, November, 1985.

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